

Elements of Sartrian Philosophy in *Electra Garrigó*

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Throughout history literary movements in different parts of the world have arisen simultaneously as a result of the times. In the era of the Second World War, in various parts of the western world, there arose a literary philosophy and movement which has been labeled by critics as the existentialist movement. In France a leading author of this movement has been and continues to be Jean-Paul Sartre whose philosophy of literature and of life has influenced numerous other authors.¹ Cuban poet and playwright Virgilio Piñera, who has written a wide variety of plays, reflects this era in *Electra Garrigó*, a play based on the Greek tragedy of Sophocles' Orestes.² *Electra Garrigó* recounts the tragic tale of Agamenon's family. Egisto, lover of Agamenon's wife Clitemnestra Plá, brutally murders Agamenon leaving his two children, Electra and Orestes, to avenge his death. Obsessively Electra plans Clitemnestra's death and executes her plan through Orestes. At the end of the tragedy, Orestes leaves his ancestral home while Electra remains behind. Although the characters are Greek, various external elements give this play a clearly Cuban nature. For example, at the beginning of the play is the traditional choral narrative in decasyllabic lines but sung to the tune of "la Guantanamera." Although the characters have traditional Greek first names, their last names are Cuban (e.g. Garrigó), and Clitemnestra meets her demise because she cannot resist the delight of the tropical *fruta-bomba*.

Electra Garrigó has many Sartrian elements and can be easily subjected to a Sartrian interpretation, although Piñera himself has adamantly stated: "No soy del todo existencialista. . . . Lo digo porque escribí *Electra* antes que *Las Moscas* de Sartre apareciera en libro . . . 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."³ In this article I shall examine and compare the Sartrian elements of *Electra Garrigó* with two plays by Sartre, *Les Mouches* and *Huis*

Clos, basing my comparison on Sartre's philosophy as manifested in those two plays.⁴

Basic Sartrian philosophy involves the understanding of several technical terms which are fully discussed in Sartre's *L'Être et le Néant*. He sees man as constantly in a state of becoming which is termed *pour-soi*. Man continuously evolves because he is what he does. Actions cause change and create something new. Often in Sartrian theatre it is the hero which is brought into being by an act. The hero—for example, Orestes of *Les Mouches* and *Electra Garrigó*, and Electra herself in *Electra Garrigó*—is fascinated with the act of murdering Clitemnestra. By the very act itself, he will be freed of his sense of void, his search will be ended. But, paradoxically, this act will also make him into what he has done. Thus, in murdering (or in broader terms, in acting), he reaches out to his fellow man in an attempt to create a bond between himself and other men. In *Les Mouches*, Orestes states "O my countrymen, I love you, and it is for you that I killed."⁵ By an action in the future, life histories can be changed. As Jacques Guicharnaud states: "The traditional idea that man commits such or such an act because he is thus and so, is replaced with its opposite: by committing such or such act, man makes himself thus and so. Nothingness to start with, man spends his life giving himself an essence made up of all his acts."⁶ Therefore, heroes in Sartrian terms are generally defined by one irrevocable act. In the process of changing the world, men are changed themselves. Thus we see Orestes in *Les Mouches* and *Electra Garrigó* defined in terms of the murder of Clitemnestra, for this is his act. In *Les Mouches* this act establishes him as king, saviour of his people, who by choice, departs to be "king without subjects or country."⁷ In *Electra Garrigó*, Orestes accomplishes his mission and departs, a completely freed and renewed identity.

A second term basic to the understanding of Sartrian philosophy is *en-soi*. This state is one of non-becoming. It is characteristic of objects (which remain basically constant) and of people who have ceased to evolve and are in general terms, dead physically and/or mentally. The best example of *en-soi* characters are found in *Huis Clos*. Inez, Estelle, and Garcin are physically dead and now in Hell, each identified by and with his past actions. Because they are dead, their essence is at a standstill; they are like objects. For them, as Garcin aptly states, "Hell is others"⁸ because constantly other people scrutinize and judge one's behavior, often branding actions with a term such as "cowardly" without knowledge of the character's motivation. In many cases, the character cannot accept and live with this cruel, subjective judgment. In Garcin's situation there is no possibility of changing the opinion others have of him because he is dead and can no longer alter his essence through action. In *Les Mouches* and *Electra Garrigó*, Clitemnestra represents a character *en-soi*. With the murder of Agamemnon she does not change. She is dominated by feelings of guilt constantly reinforced by the presence of Electra and Orestes, witnesses to her crime.⁹ In the eyes of Electra and Orestes she is guilty and for that reason, condemned. She does no significant act to alter her essence once it has been set in the mold of murderess. She is identified by her possessions rather than by her actions. Like the characters of *Huis Clos* she is aware of the constant judgment which is being passed on her; she, too, is tortured: "Después que ella [Electra] ha *mirado*

cualquier objeto de este palacio, ya no puedo *mirarlo*. Lo que *me mira*, es Electra; lo que *miró* es Electra; lo que se siente *mirado* por mí, se hace Electra . . . *Me mira*, y con esos bovinos *ojos* que tiene me dice: 'No te cargo de remordimiento, pero morirás como el muerto que produjiste'."¹⁰

As Dorothy McCall has pointed out, the central problem confronting any character in Sartrian terms is that of bearing and accepting the responsibility for one's act.¹¹ Clitemnestra is tortured by Electra's look, which is really her judgment, just as Garcin, Inez, and Estelle are tortured by each other's look of judgment. None of these characters can accept the full responsibility of his act and continue to live. Electra, too, is aware of the power of the eyes for she states: "No hay que abrir los ojos, las formas son ahora millones de ojos entrelazados que se contemplan unas a las otras" (p. 54).

On the other hand, Orestes in both *Les Mouches* and *Electra Garrigó* commits his act of murder, which has been his mission in life. With the accomplishment of this act, he does not attempt to justify or disassociate himself from what he has done. He simply moves on: symbolically, he departs. Orestes will continue to evolve, for he feels no remorse.

The Electra of *Les Mouches* and *Electra Garrigó* is not as simple a Sartrian character. In both plays she has difficulty bridging the gap between theory and practice: she herself fails to act. At the end of each play, she is on the verge of becoming a being *en-soi*. In Sartre's play Electra totally disavows her role in Clitemnestra's murder and seeks the forgiveness of Jupiter. She does not want to accept the responsibility of her part in the murder and she turns against Orestes. In Piñera's interpretation, Electra becomes identified with the house in which Clitemnestra lived. She failed to act, although like the Electra of *Les Mouches* she encouraged and guided Orestes in his decisive act. Electra lacks the internal power to find herself and instead identifies herself with the locality. Here, in a situation from which she can not escape, she must face the reality of her act of causing and masterminding her mother's death. She had expected to witness the remorse of the Erinnias, but they are non-existent and she is left with her own guilt. She perceives her condition and must live with it, inside "la puerta Electra" (p. 84). Piñera explains that Electra's decision to remain within "la puerta Electra" is the result of a lack of happiness, convictions and faith.¹² I would further specify the lack of faith in herself. Much like the characters of *Huis Clos*, she will live with the responsibility of what she has done and of what she has failed to do (actually act). She has not reached a full realization of herself, but this, too, is her responsibility and her essence: ". . . ¿Y esas Erinnias? No las veo, no acuden, ¡Vamos, acudid! No, no hay Erinnias, no hay remordimientos. Yo esperaba un batir de alas . . . No hay alas porque no hay Erinnias. Hay esta puerta, la puerta Electra. No abre ningún camino, tampoco lo cierra. ¡Considerad, inexistentes Erinnias, la poderosa realidad de esta puerta! No os alegréis, inexistentes Erinnias, no sois vosotras ese rumor que yo sólo percibo. El rumor Electra, el ruido Electra, el trueno Electra, el trueno Electra . . ." (p. 84). Electra has realized that objects are meaningless (" . . . la puerta Electra. No abre ningún camino, tampoco lo cierra."), that she as a person has the power to continue, to create, to live in Sartrian terms. Only she can change her essence; only she can create her own future, but she hesitates to take the great

step of independence. Only in her final monologue does she become fully conscious of her position and realize that she must live with the responsibility of her passive act.

A careful examination of the type of character found in Piñera's theatrical works makes it apparent that his characters are similar in nature to Sartre's. Since man is free, he makes the original choice of his own being and can vary his character by choice and act. The ability to alter one's essence is the most obvious manifestation of man's freedom. At the end of the first act of *Electra Garrigó*, Electra, Orestes, Agamenon and Clitemnestra exorcise *el destino*, emphasizing the power of free choice. As Orestes fearlessly states: "Matemos al Destino" (p. 50). That is, let us choose our own lives, let us create our essence, let us not be dominated by the idea of destiny but by that of freedom.

Orestes is, in my opinion, the character in *Electra Garrigó* who manifests Sartrean freedom to the fullest extent. His first utterance on stage ("Y yo partiré por el resto de mis días!" p. 42) lends itself to the Sartrean interpretation of a being *pour-soi*, designating Orestes as a character who is conscious of his becoming and who wishes to continue to evolve. The introduction of the theme of departure in this first statement by Orestes will be completed with the action—the murder of Clitemnestra. As Matías Montes Huidobro points out, this reaction is symbolic of the Cuban situation of that era: ". . . un mundo con elementos de nuestra nacionalidad encabezados por el matriarcado y el machismo: la ciudad que quiere ser engañada, la alegría de vivir . . . la angustia evasiva: el querer partir de Orestes."¹³ Electra will point out the direction of freedom to Orestes in Act III saying: "¡Partir! He ahí tu puerta de partir. Siempre se debe partir . . . ¡Vamos! ¡Partir, Orestes, partir!" (p. 83). In choosing to heed her, he chooses the road of a free character. Although seemingly guided by Electra and in the earlier parts of the play by Clitemnestra, it becomes more and more apparent that it is through his own choices that Orestes undertakes the acts which will determine his freedom. As Philip Thody states, speaking of Sartre's Orestes: "No man can be commanded by a sign to do anything, for he alone decides what meaning to give it. He makes his decision in isolation and anguish and no one but he can be held responsible for it."¹⁴ This statement is equally applicable to Piñera's Orestes, for neither can one man be commanded by another in Sartre's opinion. The simple reality of an action is acknowledged by Orestes himself when he coldly states: "Un sacrificio es tan sólo un puro hecho" (p. 59). He is referring to a simple, clearly defined act, that of a cock's death, from which he remains detached and lucid as he will later when murdering Clitemnestra.

Throughout Act II Orestes is portrayed as an ambitious and intelligent young man who has learned the art of survival and will use any means to attain his goal. He knows what he wants and will find a way to overcome the obstacles in his path: "La palabra es partir. Pero, ¿cómo partir? . . . ¿podré rebasar algún día estas hostiles columnas en busca del mar océano?" (p. 68). Through a philosophic monologue of cause and effect and situation, he suddenly discovers the meaning of freedom, as symbolized by the columns. Once again we encounter a Sartrean *prise de conscience*. No longer is his path uncertain, no longer is there doubt in his mind, his act is clearly defined for him: "Las cosas se plantean

así: yo, Clitemnestra, las columnas, la partida . . . Tengo que derribar esta parte de mí que se me opondrá, y una vez conseguida esta meta, procurar la otra, es decir, suprimir a Clitemnestra Plá. Seguidamente, derribar las columnas y entonces, sólo entonces, partir" (p. 74).

The Orestes of Act III is the sum of all those character traits enumerated throughout Acts I and II. He is guided by Electra, but makes the decision to kill Clitemnestra himself. He displays detachment and lucidity while committing the crime. It is this crime with which his freedom is identified, and as Robert Champigny has stated in treating Sartre's Orestes but equally appropriate here: "Freedom becomes his through his action."¹⁵ In Sartrian terms, Piñera's Orestes is a strong and free character. He has changed himself and in so doing has changed history.

Electra Garrigó portrays one type of character which Sartre likes to treat in his works. She is detached from those who surround her "con frialdad de diamante"; she enjoys using others as objects, dominating them (as she dominates Orestes), and torturing them (as she does Clitemnestra). Electra, like the characters in *Huis Clos*, is an interesting character only when interacting with those around her. A passive character, she must depend on Orestes to fulfill her mission—the murder of Clitemnestra. Through her conversations with Clitemnestra, Agamenon, and Egisto she reveals a character which lacks warmth and emotion. She is full of sarcasm and bitterness, exhibiting an unbounded egotism. In her monologues she lacks lucidity, as illustrated by her philosophy: "Yo, la que procedo fríamente con hechos. ¿Qué me podría penetrar? ¿Qué podría henderme o atravesarme?" (p. 54). Constantly referring to her action, she does not appear conscious of her passivity. She has not taken the great leap from thought to action, although mentally an energetic personality. Because she is unable to act decisively, she is entangled in a mass of gestures which are insignificant and only contribute to her feeling of void. She appears to be searching for a superior guide to her life when she invokes the *no-Dios*, but she encounters only herself. In her cold lucidity she acknowledges the harsh laws of nature such as the Law of Necessity. In all these ways she resembles the character of Inez in *Huis Clos*, who too, was the instigator of a murder, the torturer, the cold, detached lesbian. Electra talks constantly of "hechos, nada más que hechos," but in reality she does not believe until the very end of the play that one is only the sum of his acts. Only at the last moment does she gain full consciousness of the meaning of freedom.

At this point it should be apparent that the theatre is a perfect setting for the expression of existentialist philosophy because in many ways this philosophy is synonymous with the dramatic aesthetic. Through a sequence of impressions created by the actors, the audience analyzes, sympathizes and identifies with or rejects the characters in their endeavors. The actor has no "second chance." His essence is continuously recreated and in the state of *pour-soi* or evolution with each new significant act, stabilized only with the fall of the curtain. Piñera, like Sartre, succeeds in presenting characters whose essences are clearly defined and revealed to the audience through dialogues and situations which take place on stage. It is the subjective view of each character by his audience which makes him a true character. Each spectator is his judge and sees in him something

which is relevant to that spectator's own existence. According to Rine Leal it is this method of characterization which distinguishes Piñera's theatre.¹⁶

Sartre believes that the theatre is a particularly effective means of communicating directly with his public who, when he first devoted himself to theatrical works during the Second World War, shared his feelings of anguish and hope. His first works, including *Les Mouches*, were *pièces de circonstances* aimed at expressing political ideas of revolt at a time when such ideas were forbidden by the Vichy government. Here, then, is an additional parallel between the work of Sartre and Piñera: *Electra Garrigó* is an equally subtle way for Piñera to express his discontent with the political situation in Cuba, using as a cover the classical story of Sophocles. He, like Sartre, develops themes and characters on the stage, demanding the emotional participation of his audience, for how many Orestes have left Cuba and how many Electras have remained behind? Piñera includes purely Cuban characteristics in his play (as I have previously mentioned) suggesting its applicability to the situation in Cuba. As Rine Leal points out: "Virgilio triunfa en esta pieza porque logra introducir en la misma una serie de características nacionales (como por ejemplo la guantanamera que sustituye al coro antiguo y que representa disección de la sensiblería nacional . . .) que en aquel instante (1948) debieron no sólo asombrar sino también mover a la indignación."¹⁷ For Sartre and Piñera the theatre is a means of proposing and promulgating "freedom," that is, political freedom, which will be realized through significant acts. It is a call to *engagement* in the collective political life, the underlying aesthetic of much serious existential literature.

Placed in their historical setting, Sartre's and Piñera's works are examples of the existentialist movement. One lives from day to day carving one's essence by acts. All can be changed including the political situation of a country, through acts. Sartre believes that it is an author's responsibility to promote change in his works.¹⁸ Indeed, in *Electra Garrigó* Piñera has fulfilled the Sartrean obligation of portraying a society in evolution and revolution, and in so doing has portrayed the interplay of Clitemnestra, Electra, and Orestes, each a fine example of characterization resulting from the underlying existentialist philosophy.

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Notes

1. For further explanation of Sartre's philosophy and works see: Champigny, Robert, *Stages on Sartre's Way*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959. Greene, Norman N., *Jean-Paul Sartre: The Existentialist Ethic*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1960. Jeanson, Francis, *Le problème moral et la pensée de Sartre*. Paris: Editions du Myrte, 1947. Marill-Albérès, Rene, *Jean-Paul Sartre*. New York: The Philosophical Library, 1961. Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Sartre par lui-même*. [Collection Microcosme] Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1955. Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*. Hazel Barnes, trans. New York: The Philosophical Library, 1956. In French: *L'Être et le Néant*. Bibliothèque des Idées. Paris: Gallimard, 1943. Sartre, Jean-Paul, *What is Literature?* Bernard Frechtman, trans. New York: The Philosophical Library, 1949. Thody, Philip, *Jean-Paul Sartre: A Literary and Political Study*. London: Macmillan, 1960.

2. Piñera's dramatic works range from the essentially classical theatre of *Electra Garrigó* to the theatre of the absurd as in *Dos viejos pánicos* depicting the disintegration of communication. Other plays include *Jesús*, the story of a man mistaken by Cuban townsmen to be the Saviour returned to earth, and *Falsa alarma*, a farce criticizing the modern system of jurisprudence.

3. Virgilio Piñera, "Piñera teatral," *Teatro completo* (La Habana: Ediciones R, 1960), p. 15.

4. The plot of the Sartrean play, *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*) is the same as that of *Electra Garrigó*, both based on Sophocles' Greek drama. The characters in the Sartrean drama seem to me to be much more detached and colder than those in Piñera's play. The Cuban elements contribute to the more human quality of Piñera's characters. *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*) is the story of a coward (Garcin), a coquette (Estelle) and a lesbian (Inèz), who are dead and condemned to Hell. Each is seeking to understand his true essence and in that, why he is with the other two. Only through the revelation of each one's past crime does he come to understand the hopelessness of his situation, for now it is too late to alter his essence. No longer is change or character evolution possible. The constancy of their existence together and, in that, the continual judgments being rendered by each on the other two leads Garcin to state "Hell is others."

5. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mouches* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 189. (English citations from French works translated by Ainslie A. McLees.)

6. Jacques Guicharnaud, *Modern French Theatre from Giraudoux to Beckett* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 121.

7. Sartre, *Les Mouches*, p. 190.

8. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis Clos*, ed. Jacques Hardré and George B. Daniel (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1962), p. 91.

9. Piñera, "Piñera teatral," p. 12.

10. Virgilio Piñera, "Electra Garrigó," *Teatro completo*, p. 77. Subsequent references are from this edition.

11. Dorothy McCall, *The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 121.

12. Piñera, "Piñera teatral," p. 14.

13. Matías Montes Huidobro, *Persona, vida y máscara del teatro cubano* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1973), p. 141.

14. Philip Thody, *Jean-Paul Sartre: A Literary and Political Study* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1960, p. 75).

15. Robert Champigny, *Stages on Sartre's Way* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), p. 91.

16. Rine Leal, *En primera persona* (La Habana: Instituto del Libro, 1967), p. 206.

17. Leal, *En primera persona*, p. 205.

18. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 195.