

## Assault on the Schizoid Wasteland: René Marqués' *El apartamiento*

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Early in his notable book *Where the Wasteland Ends* Theodore Roszak states, "Millions of city-dwellers and suburbanites have grown accustomed to an almost hermetically sealed and sanitized pattern of living";<sup>1</sup> later he asks, "Why . . . did people enter so narrow a trap, and do so with a determination that still encourages them to make themselves at home in their captivity?" (p. 175). This is precisely the question posed earlier by René Marqués in his play *El apartamiento*, as he joins the ranks of American novelists and essayists concerned with the crushing power of the Corporate State to shrink a man into a mere consumer and mesmerize him into gratefulness for what he can only accept as progress.

Marqués' point of attack is at the level of the Latin American society as a whole, as exemplified by two typical characters with symbolic names, and the sense of loss is greatest in the area of creativity. José Enrique Rodó no doubt would be sadly appreciative of this play, for it demonstrates the very abandonment of cultural values for the sake of the benefits of cold technology which he warned against. And therein lies the play's greatest weakness: while it puts into graphic form what Roszak was to state in an essay, it becomes too obvious that the author is attempting not only to project his experience of the "wasteland," but to influence his audience to change its values. Nevertheless, the play does move, and it makes good use of the tension felt at least vaguely by every victim of the sterility of the modern urban environment.

In the view of most Latin American writers, cultural authenticity tends to be based on a new examination of the indigenous past. What is expected from it is illustrated in a portion of a conversation between Federico Robles and Manuel Chamacona in Carlos Fuentes' *La región más transparente*:

“¿Y qué quiere usted, amigo? ¿Que volvamos a vestirnos con plumas y a comer carne humana?”

“Es precisamente lo que no quiero, licenciado. . . . No, no se trata de añorar nuestro pasado y regodearnos en él, sino de penetrar en el pasado, reducirlo a razón, cancelar lo muerto—que es lo estúpido, lo rencoroso—, rescatar lo vivo y saber, por fin, qué es México y qué se puede hacer con él.”<sup>2</sup>

What this means in practice is that the thought of Newton, Bacon, et al. is rejected in favor of the mythic consciousness of the primitive. In *El apartamento*, for example, the medium is the message, for to accept the mythic form of the play and understand it is already to have moved from the bleak, technologically-conditioned environment and modes of thought of the protagonists towards a way of thinking which is more suited to a newly humanized way of life.

In this play Marqués' emphasis is on the characters' loss of creativity and of communication with the world outside themselves. The solution proposed to them by their own unconscious is to move into rebellion and escape by way of memory. In the end they are almost—though not totally—repressed by the forces of fear within them. In the development of the conflict between these psychic powers Marqués presents a rather intricate and subtle play on the contrast between time as viewed by the primitive and by the modern—that is, cyclic versus linear time. The characters unwittingly summon up youthful doubles of themselves—Lucío and Terra—who offer them the opportunity to return to the creative abandon of their early years, to begin anew. Lucío states that he knew Elpidio twenty years before, but that he is twenty-one at present. When challenged he replies that he was twenty then.<sup>3</sup> Time has not passed in the mythic realm represented by these emissaries of the unconscious mind, and their appearance represents a call to renewal in a time which is fundamentally cyclical and invites one to re-enter the past.

In stark contrast to this concept is the threat brought by the forces of repression in the persons of Cuprila and Landrilo. A violation of the apartment rules will not only result in Elpidio's and Carola's removal from it (which should be a positive value but is not viewed as such by them), but in their going to either the Incinerator Temple or the planet Deserticus (p. 52). One alternative means the outright termination of a linear life and the other at least the impossibility of beginning a new cycle on earth. Underscoring this announcement by the messengers of linear time is the fact that their appearance on the scene is to the accompaniment of a red light, traditionally associated in apocalyptic literature with the Final Judgment, and just at the point at which Carola has arrived at zero in her measurement of the ribbon (p. 50). Time has run out for them.

The conditions of life for the two protagonists is strongly reminiscent of a schizoid psychic state. The very title is suggestive of the withdrawal of the true self from contact with the threatening world, an act characteristic of schizophrenics. Marqués has subtitled the play “Encerrona en dos actos” and has a voice on the loudspeaker recite the following lines:

Y les separaron del universo  
 y les robaron su humanidad  
 y les condenaron a vivir en el  
 más total *apartamento*  
 (p. 7)

This statement, coming as it does before the curtain opens, serves to introduce the paranoid theme of "ellos," since the passive meaning is conveyed by the third person plural.

All the necessities of physical existence are provided impersonally for the couple: a dumbwaiter brings food to them already heated, and the garbage, including dishes, goes into an incinerator. "They" provide these and other services on the condition that the rules of the apartment be obeyed. Specifically, no desire for anything one had in the past is permissible. There is only one way out, a passageway leading to an elevator, which, however, leads to no exits except one above them, mentioned only once at the beginning of the play and then ignored (p. 9). It may well refer to the possibility of escape by way of higher aspirations.

As the play develops and memory emerges despite its having been prohibited, it appears that the formerly wild, uninhibited composer Elpidio (whose name is drawn from the Greek word "hope") has been seriously injured in a horseback riding accident at the edge of the sea (p. 47), and this brush with death and one of its symbols, the sea, is sufficient to cause his withdrawal from all creative efforts in order to concentrate on the mere preservation of his existence.

When he meets Carola, she is involved with the sea as well. She is just as little bound by the restrictions of conventional mores and values as Elpidio, and has been attracted by "el abismo, la furia implacable del mar." Elpidio, in contrast, now sees only the danger in it, and immediately warns her (p. 60). Apparently Marqués wishes the audience to understand that Elpidio eventually won her over to his point of view, with the result that the two individuals, formerly complementary in their creativity, have spent twenty years in total withdrawal, caring only for self-preservation without the right, even, to recall how they got into the apartment: "antes" is a word of whose meaning they are ignorant, but they know it is obscene (p. 18).

R. D. Laing says that the schizoid individual "is developing a microcosmos within himself," but that "all that belongs to [the false-self system] becomes more and more dead, unreal, false, mechanical. What was designed in the first instance as a guard or barrier to prevent disruptive impingement on the self, can become the walls of a prison from which the self cannot escape."<sup>4</sup> This type of person often withdraws on account of what Laing calls ontological insecurity, the threat that contact between the true self and other persons will result in annihilation.

This insecurity becomes so intense, even in the apartment, that Elpidio asks the question, "¿Existimos nosotros?" (p. 24), and the slightest contact with anything suggestive of the outside world results in the fear of destruction: a small package at the door is thought to be a bomb sent by the nebulous "ellos"

(pp. 14-15). When the packages turn out to be simply household utensils and gadgets Elpidio concludes that "they" are either going to inundate them with useless things (that is, anything not directly connected with the preservation of one's existence) or provoke them to destroy themselves by desiring a different life (p. 22). The tendency of the schizophrenic is to depersonalize other people, to "turn them to stone" and thereby render them harmless. Therefore Lucío, when he appears, is seen by Elpidio as "otra cosa inútil" (p. 29). The same is true of Carola's relationship to Terra (p. 34). Since Lucío and Terra are simply psychic forces within Elpidio and Carola, another statement of Laing's becomes significant: "The individual's self-relationship becomes a pseudo-interpersonal one, and the self treats the false selves as though they were other people whom it depersonalizes" (*Divided Self*, p. 74). So it is that neither character even recognizes that the people who mysteriously appear in the hermetically sealed apartment are nothing more nor less than previously latent contrary tendencies within themselves.

There is no interpersonal communication from the apartment: it is impossible to call anyone from it (p. 39). In fact, the protagonists are not even certain that other people exist.<sup>5</sup> They experience complete disorientation in space and time, in that they are ignorant even of what floor they live on, for no point of reference is valid for them (pp. 15-16). Since only artificial light is allowed in, even the circadian rhythm of life—which scientists have come to view as being of great importance at all levels<sup>6</sup>—is missing, and time is completely subjective (p. 45).

The system includes an attempt at total thought-control. Specifically, memory, the past itself, the will and creative power are forbidden (p. 53), and thoughts are to be limited to the utilitarian; there are to be none of a poetic, philosophical or metaphysical nature (p. 43), presumably because these could lead to an evaluation of one's present condition, rebellion, and then destruction. Elpidio's assigned duty is to assemble a puzzle in the form of a man, reflecting the schizoid preoccupation with the self and its problems. His comment is "Siempre queda algo incompleto" (p. 19). Carola, on the other hand, engages in the task of measuring a blue ribbon, representing, no doubt, the simple marking of the passage of time. At times she loses the count, but while it doesn't matter (p. 23)—the task is utterly devoid of meaning—she must do it extremely carefully (p. 52). There are even television programs to teach the technical points of the two tasks.

The full crisis is precipitated and the positive forces are crushed by the negative when it comes to the attention of "them" that the programs have been missed and that foreign matter has been burned in the incinerator. Ironically, the "foreign matter" is Carola's book of poems, which she has tried to do away with.

The curtain opens, however, onto a scene already suggesting the tension which ultimately leads to the final repression. In fact, the inevitable tension has been suggested even before the curtain opens, by "una alternada y dramática lucha entre música atonal y estridente moderna y música dulce de flauta o caramillo de la región de los Andes" (p. 7). Not only does the author suggest

in his initial stage directions, "Hay en las palabras cierta subterránea, innumerable angustia" (p. 9), but the first words heard by the audience are those of Carola, alone, as she counts backward, suggesting that eventually she will reach zero and something definitive will take place. At it turns out, though she does not intend it to be so, the duration of the countdown represents the length of time the two characters have in which to choose another life before the forces of repression literally move in.

The dissatisfaction of Carola and Elpidio with the present state of affairs is immediately made evident by the fact that the latter has just gone down three times in search of an exit (p. 9). Since it is suggested later how long they have been in the apartment, presumably they have spent twenty years without questioning their condition and are only now beginning to become restive. After some discussion Carola flatly states, "Quisiera cambiar" (p. 11). There is a quest by her for something to do besides measure the ribbon. She can pour the coffee from the thermos bottle into the cup, and her pathetic excitement is reflected in the thrice-repeated "De la botella a la taza" (p. 11). This desire for alternative activities is what—psychologically speaking—sets off the doorbell, for when curiosity finally overcomes the paranoid fear of a bomb, they discover a package containing an iron. They decide to leave it where they found it as a "useless thing," but it is followed by a dishwasher and other household items. These are hardly the necessary tools of a self-reliant frontier existence, but they do represent a small step in a humanizing direction.

Jung often identifies the people who appear in dreams as symbols of psychic forces presented by the unconscious as helpers along the way to the restoration of balance. Thus the household goods at the door—which eventually disappear—are followed by a man whose appearance is that of Elpidio as a young man (p. 26). His name is Lucío, and it is evident from the name that he represents the enlightenment which spurred on Elpidio—or "Hope"—to his creative efforts, and can do so again. Significantly, he appears at the exact moment when Elpidio is charging the door with the intention of going down and battering an opening to the outside world.

Lucío enters accompanied by "una luz azul de sueño" (p. 26), and later it is stated that he comes from "la remota región del sueño" (p. 60). He was a musical protégé of Elpidio's about twenty years before, and reminds the latter of his *Sinfonía de las Estrellas*, which represented "la alegría del universo" (pp. 30-31). Elpidio's advice to Lucío had been, "Tienes que buscar la raíz de lo tuyo," and the phrase now serves to summarize the message of Lucío's present mission to Elpidio, particularly since the original idea was to travel afar and become acquainted with nature and the people (p. 31). Nevertheless, Elpidio attempts to force Lucío to leave, but is reminded that there is no exit (p. 32).

When the two leave to verify the fact once more, Lucío's female counterpart, Terra, appears at the open door. She of course has the appearance of a young Carola (p. 33), and is accompanied by a blue light. Her name suggests that she is related to the earth-force, as does the fact that she is dressed in red. Whereas Lucío corresponds to the enlightened type of creativity, Terra symbolizes the

creative fertility of the earth itself. But she declares that in the past Carola herself was "la naturaleza primigenia" (p. 35).

Terra reminds her of that past, when she was the poetess of all America (and her very name refers to a type of song and dance), wild and unfettered. She speaks of "aquel fuego que un día incendió toda nuestra América" (p. 35). But one point of the play appears to be that fire is an ambivalent commodity, and Carola's response is "Aquí el único fuego es el del incinerador" (p. 35). (It will be recalled that the sea too produced mixed feelings.) Eventually the Carola whose fire produced books of poetry throws those books into the incinerator.

More than in the case of Lucío with Elpidio, Terra develops a mythic past for Carola's memory to work on. She speaks of the primitive union of masculine and feminine expressed in terms of her submission to a faun (which, she admits, was only an encounter with a young peasant, elevated by Carola's poetic imagination, p. 35), and the great passion of her life was Orestes (p. 38), the mythic figure who, as the total antithesis to all that Elpidio now is, represents reckless aggressiveness and violent action for a cause.

Eventually fear wins out, for the characters known as Cuprila and Landrilo appear at the door. Dressed in black, they enter under a red light and accompanied by the atonal music heard previously. They describe themselves as "inspectores" (p. 51), the root meaning of which has to do with looking within. Three times in one speech of Landrilo's, in which he enumerates the infractions of the apartment rules, the time period of three days appears (p. 51), and it may be that, as in the case of Jonah, Christ and others, this may be the period of the descent into Hades (or the unconscious) before the emergence of an opportunity for new life.

As mentioned previously, the threat of punishment for breaking the rules of the apartment relates to the schizophrenic's ontological insecurity, tied in with the dangers implicit in creativity: "Pierde el apartamento con todas sus conveniencias y entonces *se expone*, bien al Templo Incinerador donde se borrará todo rastro de su ser o al planeta Deserticus donde tendrá usted que *crear* su propia civilización" (p. 52, italics mine).

Before the entrance of Cuprila and Landrilo, Elpidio suddenly asks the meaning of "Guajataca"; Carola responds that it is an Indian name and that the Indian is America's conscience, the only one capable of saving her (pp. 42-43). After the initial interview with Cuprila and Landrilo there suddenly appears (he does not walk in as do the others, implying perhaps that he has been there all along) a character described as "Tlo, indio de Iberoamérica" (p. 55). Elpidio becomes shaken and paranoid, forgetting that "ellos" are now in the apartment and attributing Tlo's appearance to them. Carola becomes totally hysterical. Tlo then makes it clear that his mission is to slay the repressive powers and he goes up to the room above (which appears to be the domain of the dominant psychic force) to do so. After Elpidio has definitively rejected Lucío's arguments and returned to working the puzzle, and Carola has told Terra, "Déjeme usted, por favor. Yo soy la que mide la cinta azul," Tlo appears on the staircase with his hands tied, followed by Terra and Lucío (p. 62).

Later, unnoticed by Carola and Elpidio, the two inspectors carry out the dead bodies of Terra and Lucío (p. 66). The fears of Carola and Elpidio have provided them with the power to bind the one and kill the others.

As the inspectors leave, voicing more threats, they leave the bloody knife on Elpidio's table and give him instructions to kill the Indian (p. 67). However, when they have left, the two protagonists rationalize their way out of the task and simply cut him loose, so that he is free to leave, still threatening to kill (p. 69). At the conclusion Elpidio and Carola, wondering whether he will return for them, hear the doorbell again. Elpidio suggests that it may be death awaiting them (no doubt in punishment for their new act of disobedience), and she replies, "O la liberación, Elpidio." But this time the threat of death results in no hesitation: as the curtain falls, she goes to open the door.

As a thesis play, *El apartamento* fails to satisfy the reader's desire for a work of art unattached to causes beyond that of its own creation, yet it is surprisingly well done, perhaps transcending the author's didactic purpose as the plays of Sartre tend to do. In any case it is an interesting example of those Spanish American works expressing their authors' revolt against the sort of modern life which provides security at the price of repression and the loss of creativity and conscience.

It is clear throughout the play that Marqués has in mind the present situation of all of Latin America. His setting is "un rincón cualquiera de las Américas" and the time is "presente o futuro." In other words, where it has not yet happened it may occur before long. The value of the play among its contemporaries lies, perhaps, in its vision—an accurate one—of modern America exhibiting schizoid characteristics on account of her choice of security over identity and stimulation.

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## Notes

1. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1973), p. 10.
2. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, fifth printing, 1969), p. 269.
3. René Marqués, *El apartamento*, in *Three Contemporary Latin-American Plays*, ed. Ruth Lamb (Waltham, MA: Xerox, 1971), p. 29. Further references will be noted in the text.
4. *The Divided Self* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1969), pp. 74, 144, 138. Further references will be noted in the text.
5. P. 24. It is worth noting that the argument for the existence of other human beings proceeds from the existence of consumer goods.
6. See Lyall Watson, chapter on "Cosmic Law and Order" in *Supernature* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1973), pp. 5-42.