

Egon Wolff's *La balsa de la Medusa*: Is the Bourgeoisie Waving or Drowning?

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Egon Wolff's *La balsa de la Medusa* (1984),¹ along with *Los invasores* (1964) and *Flores de papel* (1971) forms a trilogy about the bourgeoisie. Once again Wolff enters the realms of nightmarish reality in which the subconscious fears, uncertainties and guilt of the bourgeoisie are explored in a play that oscillates between the surreal and the real.

La balsa de la Medusa takes place in three acts. In the first, a group arrives amid much commotion at the palatial home of their host, Leonardo, to which they have been invited from another party. On arrival they are greeted by the butler, Conrado, who announces that, lamentably, the host has been called away but that they may use the house, apart from certain areas whose safety cannot be guaranteed. The guests are initially only mildly annoyed by the absence of the host, but gradually a feeling of unease sets in. One of the women wonders why they had to be taken through the most squalid parts of the city to arrive; there are sounds of explosions and bombs outside; Conrado explains that "la región está sometida a una gran agitación últimamente. En los bosques se mueve gente" (108); they find clothes they recognize as belonging to friends and relatives that seem to have been left there as if the owners had fled in a hurry. And it is unclear if any of them really knows their host. At the end of the first act Conrado announces that, unfortunately, the only bridge connecting them to the city has been blown up and that, therefore, they must wait until help arrives.

The second act takes place at dawn on the fourth day. There is an atmosphere of disorder "propio de gente que ha debido improvisar sus lugares de sueño" (129), and although there has been a certain accommodation to the circumstances, there is a growing sense of

unease and imprisonment. One of the group, Javier, has been bitten by the guard dogs as he wandered, in an attempt to escape, into prohibited territory; tensions are apparent among the group, especially in relation to the Jew, Goldberg, who awakens the deepest prejudices of some of the number. The position seems hopeless. But these are rich people who have made their fortunes through business and enterprise, the men believe themselves to be "hombres de acción" (166) and the industrialist (Serrano-Soler) proposes that they bribe their way out, a solution that is scorned by the others, who realize that if indeed they are being trapped then money is not the escape. Neither is the use of an ancient pistol that another character has found. This act ends as one of the women tries to drown herself in the swimming pool and Javier's drug addiction is discovered.

The third act takes place on the tenth day and the set is even more disordered: "El ámbito muestra ahora un desorden propio de aquellos lugares donde está obligado a convivir un conglomerado humano, que realiza ahí su humanidad menesterosa, frágil, precaria" (171). Again there is a sense in which they have adapted to the circumstances, and communication has been established between people who, otherwise, would find little in common. But the threats from outside seem to be nearer, the dead can be seen from the terraces, and a note saying "Sálvense mientras puedan" is discovered. Another plan is devised by the "men of action," who decide to use the ancient pistols to shoot their way out, but this is an unadulterated failure and they return blaming the businessman, García, for surrendering the weapons to a group of assailants. The fear and isolation are deepened by the news that "they" have taken the city. As the captives become utterly desperate, finally laying the blame on the Jew, they are overcome by the sensation of floating, as if the house were drifting away from the land. Emilia begins to pray and, in their desperation, the others join in. At that point Leonardo appears. He is jovial and welcoming, claiming that he has never left the house and that their experience has been an "alucinación colectiva" (207). Despite vague doubts that the experience was real, the guests flee, leaving articles of clothing behind as the next group of guests arrives.

La balsa de la Medusa is introduced by a reference to the event and the painting in which the play is inspired: "A fines del siglo XVIII, un grupo de individuos fueron encontrados solitarios y abandonados navegando en una balsa. Eran los naufragos del bergantín hundido hacía algún tiempo, llamado 'Medusa.' El pintor romántico francés, Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) pintó un cuadro basado en ese hecho, que se conserva hasta hoy en el museo del Louvre en París" (81). What is it in this painting that caught the interest of Wolff? And why should the same picture be cited as the source of inspiration

for Luis Buñuel's film, *The Exterminating Angel*, with which *La balsa de la Medusa* shares profound similarities?² Here I do not want to study the points of contact between these two works, or indeed with Sartre's *No Exit*, only to suggest that "The Raft of Medusa" evoked similar possibilities in the artists for the study of the bourgeoisie stripped of all the social graces and symbols that make up the edifice of their powerful and respected place in society. Michel Estève says that the connection between the elegant guests and the castaways, "prisoners of the sea, tormented by hunger and thirst," is that, as their condition deteriorates in their captivity, during which they are deprived of even the most basic needs, they become "recognizable companions in distress."³ Wolff takes the image one step further, however, for his guests are transformed into real shipwreck victims when they feel the house float away. They too have been abandoned and have little hope of survival, but they too are discovered and rescued.

There are two contrasting elements to this examination of the bourgeoisie. One is the timeless, paralyzed psyche of the individual born into or entering this world: "En el fondo la burguesía es parálitica. Inmovilizada por la misma repetición majadera e incesante de sus magras justificaciones. La parálisis de lo inevitable y su culpa."⁴ This is evoked through dreams, nightmares, the awful, relentless awareness of an imminent day of reckoning. In *La balsa de la Medusa* the protagonists are absolutely isolated from the world outside, and they experience a final departure from reality as they feel the house float away. The other level is that of the real role of the bourgeoisie in society, a role from which the captives are detached in the play. This role is not paralyzed: the characters are rich and prospering, and though they may be impressed by the sumptuous display of wealth in Leonardo's mansion, Luisa reminds them that "todos somos ricos aquí" (187), and they see themselves as "hombres de acción," thereby trying to transpose the strength of their position in the outside to their immediate situation by using the resources that had helped to create their power in society. I will return to this and its interpretation in present circumstances later. Firstly, I want to study the nature of the fears portrayed.

The first two acts begin with the intrusion of three beggars into the mansion and with an appearance by Leonardo. In the first act three beggars, a man (El), a woman (Ella) and El Militar, announce the arrival of the guests, mocking and tormenting Conrado, the diligent butler, caterer to the needs of the wealthy and emulator of their moral codes and habits. At the beginning of the second act they return to look over the state of the captives, wondering if they really know what is in store for them. El Militar is aloof and educated,

articulate in his detest of the rich and their hedonistic games; he holds in the utmost contempt their idolatry of material wealth; and he is determined that they will meet a just end. He is the personification of the real, organized threat of vengeance and is reminiscent of China in *Los invasores* or El Merluza in *Flores de papel*. At the end of the third act the beggars appear again announcing the new arrivals, guessing about how they will cope, and defying Conrado.

Leonardo is always seen before or after the intrusion of the beggars. In the first act, Leonardo speaks as if forced by fate to continue to submit the bourgeoisie to this ritual torture, but he fails to grasp the full sense of what he is doing: "Obedezco los designios, pero se me escapa el sentido de todo esto, Conrado. . .No soy más que un peón en el proyecto de lo desconcido" (85-86). In the second act he wanders around the sleeping bodies, watching, wondering at their seeming tranquility, and he kisses Luisa, despairing at his distance from human contact, at his imprisonment in the role of the host. He tells Conrado, "¡Dales duro, Conrado! ¡Inventa tus torturas! Yo estaré en mi pieza, reprochándotelo. . .y sin embargo. . .gozando intensamente. . ." (132), and his anguish at the inevitable predictability of their actions leads him to reveal his greatest illusion: "¡Quisiera ver alguna vez, que algunos de ellos rompiera su predestinación y se pusiera a hacer cosas heroicas. . .Ser valiente por ejemplo, arrojado... generoso! Salirse de su piel, y hacer cosas imprevistas. . .lo redimiría ante mis ojos. . .y los de Dios" (133). When he presents himself to his guests at the end of the third act, he is the man of the world: "Es ahora un majestuoso y espléndido hombre de mundo. La representación de la mundanidad más esplendorosa" (207). On being left by the fleeing guests the cycle continues for him.

Héctor Noguera, who directed *La balsa de la Medusa*, sees the beggars and Leonardo as the constants of wealth and poverty in the world: "Son los dos extremos,, testigos de la historia. Los que siempre están aguardando."⁵ The barking of the guard dogs always accompanies the appearance of the host and the beggars; on one hand this represents the persistent awareness of invasion, but the dogs are also the guardians to the entrance to hell in which the guests will be trapped. The role of the beggars is easy to interpret: they are the personification of the fears of the bourgeoisie. The fact that they are not seen by the protagonists suggests that they represent the most subconscious level of this fear. While the characters do not see or guess at the existence of the beggars, they are all too aware of the nearness of the *guerrilleros*. These may not exist either, but their presence is acknowledged by the guests, for they are the projection of the most conscious fear, that of organized vengeance through revolution.

Leonardo is less easy to decipher than the beggars and the terrorists. It is through Leonardo that the characters relate to each other, but this communication has an air of ritual and the absurd. The noise and fuss of their arrival is a ritual enacted at the arrival at any party, and while the conversation at first is more or less normal and joking, it revolves around the attempt to decipher Leonardo's character through the signs in the house and around the interpretation of the journey there through pine forests, abandoned beaches, poverty: "¿Quién se construiría su casa en un sitio tan inhóspito?" (97). But why should they have to decipher the personality of someone they already know? It is up to the mundane and pragmatic Emilia to point out that no one knew him before he arrived at the party. By the end of the first act he has faded as a known figure, they are sure they never knew him, and they begin to feel like prisoners in his house. The characters can only intuit that they are being deliberately trapped, a feeling articulated by the more intelligent of them: "Tengo la sospecha que alguien nos está poniendo a una especie de prueba, y que no nos estamos pasando el examen" (185). These are the words of the homosexual designer Mario who along with Lucía and Goldberg responds to the ludic promise of their entrapment, expressed by Lucía: "Siempre me ha fascinado expediciones por mansiones abandonadas... ¡Quizás qué monstruos nos asalten desde viejos baúles polvorientos" (102). Still, none of them takes the step of blaming Leonardo for the hell they are in, and instead they search in their store of historical conventions and blame the Jew, the archetypal scapegoat. The bourgeoisie may feel threatened by invasion from the dark figures and shadows that wander around outside, from the lower classes, but they do not feel the threat from their own, from Leonardo.

So who is Leonardo, what does he represent? Leonardo, it must be recognized, is one of them, and he too finds the beggars frightful. In the first act, when he enters as they leave, he tells Conrado that railings must be put up to keep them at bay so as to preserve the peace of his home, but Conrado explains that they will always find a way to slip by him, for they are the perpetual, inventive, persistent torment. When Leonardo appears to his guests in the final scene he is familiar, they address him as "tú," they think he has played a sick practical joke, he is attractive to the women. Egon Wolff wonders about Leonardo's identity in the following terms: "¿Leonardo, quién es... ¿La fatalidad de la historia?... ¿el incesante ir y venir, llegar e irse, de la culpa? El que está destinado a atraer a los hombres al placer de vivir. El que presencia lo incesante."⁶

Leonardo is, in fact, the author's *alter ego*, for like the author he devises ways of testing the characters, searches for situations that will "force circumstances," that will extract unexpected and saving

actions from the people lost in the hell he has created for them. In the first act Leonardo seems tired by the predictability of his guests and he longs for them to break out of the mould in which they are set. As they leave it is an open question whether they have learned from their experience, but the implication is that inevitably they will exit directly into a world of bourgeois ritual, as Leonardo predicts: "Vendrán forzando los motores de sus coches, ansiosos, como éstos, por la parcela de placer... Cargados, como éstos, con sus extravíos y sus debilidades, vendrán a que les demos techo y los deleitemos... pero partirán tan desorientados, tan vulnerables, como llegaron" (212). Hope can only be insinuated, in the prayer they utter in desperation towards the end, for example, but is it merely another illusion: "Estos al menos rezaron. ¿Los oíste? Recurrieron a esa solución; otros, hasta se olvidan de eso... Me dio cierta esperanza, ¿sabes? Algunos lo hicieron muy sinceramente... ¿Seré ingenuo?" (212).

Leonardo declares that despite putting his characters through torment he does, in fact, love them, and it is this love that compels him to continue. This is the nature of the trap in which he finds himself: "Lo peor es que los amo, Conrado... No sabría qué hacer sin ellos... pero sufro de no poder evitar sus sufrimientos" (212). Like the author, he belongs to them, he understands them, he puts the characters in situations in which the conflict and development will be carried by their inner conflicts and he hopes for an end to the paralysis: "¿Amo yo como autor a esos seres? Sí, creo que sí... Si no, no podría haber escrito una historia en torno a la condenación irredemiable, porque, ¿para qué hacerlo?".⁷

La balsa de la Medusa does not differ greatly in its aims from Wolff's earliest writing, in which he sought to bring out "el rumor interior" that would be the impetus for the characters to exit from the conflictive and seemingly inescapable trap they were in: "Debe habitar en ellos un germen de búsqueda y anhelo que cunda a pesar del infortunio aparente. Esa fuerza de voluntad no debe partir, sin embargo, de un reconocimiento intuitivo y ciego de sus posibilidades de vida, sino que debe provenir de una concepción casi racional de vida, de que se es hijo de los actos que se cometen. Quiero personajes que estén a la altura del conflicto."⁸ By *La balsa de la Medusa* in 1984, the characters are not equal to the conflict. Leonardo would seem to be a projection of Wolff's wearied disillusion at the possibility of the characters ever making the step by which they would exit from the paralysis of the human condition. The answer is in the words of one of the characters, Mario, who intuits the sense of the trap: "Lo único que sé es que hay que esperar a que el tiempo pase y que alguien haga algo que nunca hará" (185). But they are locked in mediocrity, hidden behind the facade of the constant race for new erotic

pleasures, for excitement, for new experiences which are not, in fact, new but a perpetual evasion of inner unease. Without Leonardo's act of pity, by which he frees them from the mansion he has set up as an externalization of these fears, they would most certainly sink.

The director, Héctor Noguera, points to the fact that *La balsa de la Medusa* forms a trilogy with *Los invasores* and *Flores de papel*:

Es interesante anotar las fechas en que fueron estrenadas las dos obras anteriores y escrita *La balsa*. *Los invasores* 1964. *Flores de papel* 1971. *La balsa de la Medusa* 1982. Tres fechas claves de la historia de Chile. Los invasores se presentan como pesadilla del industrial Meyer, una pesadilla con serios visos de realidad cuando al final de la obra vemos nuevamente la mano de China romper el cristal de la puerta para penetrar en la casa del rico Lucas Meyer cuando éste ya estaba convencido que todo había sido un sueño. Era 1964. *Flores de papel*. El departamento de Eva está cubierta y ella misma en su traje de novia de flores de papel de diario como signo y símbolo de una nueva belleza, de una estética del mundo cambiado, distinto. Era 1971. *La balsa de la Medusa*. Es el caos y la destrucción inevitable del extremo más poderoso, tal como quedara anunciado con la aparición de la mano de China. Era 1982.⁹

Certain years are cited as being key dates but their importance is not elaborated on, since they need no further explanation to the Chilean reader. 1964 saw the election of the Christian Democrat government, so the threat, insinuated in the presence of more extreme parties, was relieved, there was a way out for the bourgeoisie; 1971 was the second year of the Popular Unity's "pacific road to socialism," the government's most successful year, when the threat against the bourgeoisie looked as if it was nearing realization. But what is so important about 1982 and why should it represent the "inevitable destruction of the most powerful extremes?" 1982 was nine years into the Pinochet regime and the economic policies which had meant continuing prosperity for a large part of the middle and upper sectors were beginning to fail, there was an economic crisis, and political opposition was finding a stronger voice and greater support among some sectors who had previously supported the regime. The threat, quashed for so long, looked as if it might return.

Noguera's interpretation of history is clear: it is supposed that in the last play of the trilogy the bourgeoisie has finally sunk, that it can have no redemption. It is thus implied that the bourgeoisie, having survived the onslaught of radical policies and socialism, is finally

put at greatest risk by those who are supposed to be protecting them, and who ultimately only prolong the indifference and complacency that will finally be the downfall of their class. This sets *La balsa de la Medusa* within the context of a continued hope in the promise of radical change. Noguera sees Eva in *Flores de papel* as having worn the grotesque paper bride's dress as her way of assuming the "new beauty, the new aesthetics of a changing, different world," by implication, of accepting the "new society" of Popular Unity. But that is not what Eva does. She surrenders to a tramp whose almost pathological desire¹⁰ is not for a revolution that will raise the masses from poverty and squalor, but that will destroy Eva's class by reducing it to the same poverty and squalor. Eva does not assume a new beauty. As Margaret Sayers Peden has pointed out, at the end of the play, "Eva has been completely erased."¹¹ In his assessment of *La balsa de la Medusa*, Noguera does not address the question of why the bourgeoisie is, nevertheless, still surviving, adrift perhaps, but waving, not drowning. Wolff's interpretation of the role of the bourgeoisie is best explained by Margaret S. Peden, who has seen a progression between *La Mansión de lechuzas* (1964), *Los invasores* and *Flores de papel*:

In *Mansión*. . .the entrance of that outside into the world of the play is seen as a healthy thing. What is dead is within; life enters with the world. The message of *Los invasores* is somewhat different. Life is without. What is within may be only illusion. If one chooses illusion over truth, he is choosing his own destruction. The established world may have been invaded against choice, but the implication is that if one then chooses truth over illusion there may still be time for a satisfactory accommodation between the two worlds. The resolution hinges upon the choice. In *Flores de papel*, however, the possibility of choice has been removed. One has waited too long. Along with the possibility of choice, logic and order have also disappeared. Eva does not really choose to invite "El Merluza" to stay--she is powerless to do otherwise. The deck is stacked against her. She does not will her own destruction, but neither can she prevent it. The invader, once inside, destroys what he has won and all that is left are two invaders where there had only been one.¹²

La balsa de la Medusa is closer to *Los invasores* with which it shares the quality of the circular dream. There is an element of choice involved, or rather, the characters are given the opportunity to

free themselves, but they do not, they cannot. The threat of the invader is no longer there, or if it exists it is well guarded against, as Leonardo explains: "No teman, amigos... Disparos en la noche... Hace tiempo que asolan la región, pero sólo asustan a los niños... La policía da buena cuenta de ellos" (210). That they are being threatened from outside is merely an illusion, for the real threat comes from their own complacency and from the forces that protect them in society: that is what keeps them captive in the mansion. With *La balsa de la Medusa* Wolff returns to the cyclical nightmare of *Los invasores*. All that is within the mansion is illusion and stagnation, and the major difference is the retreat of the invader. The three plays demonstrate the cyclical threat which rears its ugly head periodically, but it shows a bourgeoisie that has been, in essence, immune to the threat until the present day.

This must inevitably be linked with reality. The message, according to Héctor Noguera, is that the bourgeoisie is doomed. For him the play is about: "el caos y la destrucción inevitable del extremo más poderoso," he links this to the date of the play, 1982, and insinuates links with effective opposition to the regime. The bourgeoisie, he says, are effectively sunk, destroyed by indifference and disregard for the poverty and suffering of others, which will inevitably open the way to revolution. But revolution is well under control in this play, which suggests the "enormous capacity (of the bourgeoisie) to protect and preserve itself."¹³ For the characters do survive.

Wolff implies that the characters, and Leonardo himself, are all captive parts of an ultimately unchanging world order. Leonardo finds an unlimited number of victims, they are all rich, they are attracted by the lure of the house, by the scent of adventure, by new sensual experiences, they can afford to indulge in fantasy worlds and, alternatively, fantasy worlds are a necessary part of their escape from reality. That this turns into a nightmare is an integral part of their spiritually trapped condition. But Leonardo's world is a world in isolation. In it they created chaos, they turned his home into a "gypsy camp," others have vomited on his best rugs, destroyed his furniture in their complete abandonment of their decent facade, but inevitably they leave to re-enter the society in which they can once again hide away the absurdity and ritual of their lives, and adopt the mask of respectability and social relevance. *La balsa de la Medusa* closes a trilogy about the bourgeoisie, not by predicting its demise, but by returning to the initial premise posed in *Los invasores*: that it may be saved from moral destruction by exercising the choice of truth over illusion, but in this the characters ultimately fail: "Yo creo, en resumen, que la balsa seguirá navegando eternamente con su carga de cadáveres y de buitres."¹⁴

Notas

1. All references will be to *La balsa de la Medusa, Apuntes*, Número especial (1984), 81-215. The characters are described as follows: "Aparece el grupo de invitados, de etiqueta, como viniendo de un cocktail elegante. Ellas, rutilantes. Ellos, convencionales, desenfadados. Son: Julián García, el comerciante (48) y su mujer, Emilia (43); Serrano-Soler, el industrial (50) y su amante Luisa (35); El Dr. Italo Sergetti (43) y su mujer Cintia (36); Carla, diseñadora de modas (34) y su amigo Mario Cruz, decorador y anticuario (36); Moshe Goldberg, joyero (46); Teresa, cellista (26); Javier, rentista (24)" (p.88).

2. See Michel Estéve who states that, "According to Buñuel's son, Juan, the idea for *The Exterminating Angel* originated in the famous painting by Géricault, 'The Raft of the Medusa'," in "*The Exterminating Angel: No Exit from the Human Condition*," in *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Joan Mellen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p.245. In *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) a group of bourgeois guests at a dinner after a night at the opera, find themselves inexplicably unable to leave the dining room although the door is open, and while they are trapped they find themselves isolated, oblivious to the attempts of those outside to save them and left to their own resources to survive. Finally, equally inexplicably, they find they are able to leave only to be shepherded into a cathedral, the ultimate symbol of their trapped nature in society.

3. Michel Estéve, "*The Exterminating Angel: No Exit from the Human Condition*," p.245.

4. Egon Wolff, "Ideas dispersas sobre *La balsa de la Medusa*," *Apuntes*, Número especial (1985), p.61.

5. Héctor Noguera, "En torno a *La balsa de la Medusa*," *Apuntes*, Número especial (1985), p.76.

6. "Ideas dispersas sobre *La balsa de la Medusa*," p.60.

7. "Ideas dispersas sobre *La balsa de la Medusa*," p.64.

8. Egon Wolff, "Sobre mi teatro" in *Teatro chileno actual* (Santiago: Empresa Editora Zig-Zag, 1966). p.164.

9. "En torno a *La balsa de la Medusa*," pp.70-71. The play was written in 1982 and had its first performance by the theatre of the Drama School of the Catholic University, Santiago in 1984.

10. Frank Dauster, "Concierto para tres: *Kindergarten* y el teatro ritual," *Caravelle*, 40 (1983), p.11.

11. Margaret Sayers Peden, "Three Plays of Egon Wolff," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/1 (1969), p.34.

12. Margaret Sayers Peden, "Three Plays of Egon Wolff," pp.34-35.

13. See Gwynne Edwards, *The Discreet Art of Luis Buñuel. A Reading of his Films* (London. Boston: Marion Boyars, 1983), p.188.

14. Letter from the author commenting on the play, January 1987.