

Metatheatre: Roberto Arlt's Vehicle toward the Public's Awareness of an Art Form

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The interplay of two levels of reality in Roberto Arlt's dramatic production has been well studied. Raúl Castagnino finds that "dualidad de planos, sea sueño o vigilia, realidad o fantasía, donde aquellas tramas se alternan y complican" is one of the characteristic traits of his work.¹ However, this "duality of planes" is also a basic characteristic of theatre itself. While on the one hand we, as readers or spectators, witness the unfolding of events that we know not to be real, we are willing to allow the fictional world to be our reality for a while. Thus viewed, the fiction of drama becomes reality. That the public accept the fictional reality being presented to it was, in traditional theatre, considered the norm. But this view of drama as a reality to be accepted for only a short while has come under serious question, especially in our century, as new theatrical forms were proposed and implemented which rejected the passive role of the audience and attempted to invite the spectator to see theatre for what it really is: fiction, played out on the stage by actors who may or may not be trying to portray reality.

Brecht and Artaud were, of course, the main expositors of the practical and theoretical basis on which such types of theatre have been developed, along the lines of the epic and the absurd, both of which have had a great deal of impact on contemporary stage production. These are, however, global views of theatre and they are deeply bound with an ideology or philosophy of man that conditions, or should condition, in their opinion, the very essence of all theatre. And we must keep in mind that Arlt (1900-42) lived before these forms of theatre came to exert their full influence on dramatic production. What we do know, as James Troiano has shown, is that "there are obvious direct influences in Arlt's plays" of Pirandello's theatre, and that they are such that rather than merely reproduce the Italian's themes and techniques, these "are transformed and thus integrated into Arlt's own bizarre literary style and *Weltanschauung*."² Arlt himself denied this influence on his theatre, but the very fact that he himself was not willing or able to see it points to the originality with which he adapted it, creating a form strictly his own.

Arlt's theatre will not let itself be bound by the limits of a simple category. While not necessarily falling into any one particular current, his theatre shares individual traits with several theatrical tendencies and also stands apart in a unique and unmistakable way with respect to its audience, a theatre that is both aware of its own theatricality and of the existence of the duality inherent in its expression. Lionel Abel states that "only certain plays tell us at once that the happenings and characters are of the playwright's invention," and that to this type of theatre belongs a "whole range of plays" which still enjoy a commonality:

All of them are theatre pieces about *life seen as already theatricalized*. By this I mean that the persons appearing on stage in these plays are there . . . because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. What dramatized them originally? *Myth, legend, past literature, they themselves*. They represent to the playwright the effect of dramatic imagination before he has begun to exercise his own . . . they are aware of their own theatricality.³

Elaborating on this idea and dealing specifically with the character as a fictional entity, June Schlueter speaks in terms that are particularly appropriate to this study:

By its very nature, the dramatic character is twofold: it is simultaneously both actor and character. . . . Normally we willingly accept this convention. [But in the plays to be studied here, the playwright] is asking us not to forget the fictive nature of the *dramatis personae*, have instead created a situation which may be more demanding intellectually and confusing emotionally, but which ultimately is truer to the conception of drama than the conventional absorption in illusion. For by insisting that the audience cognitively maintain bifocal vision, the playwright is constantly and overtly sustaining the dialectic which exists between reality and illusion.⁴

Arlt insists on making us maintain this "bifocal vision" alert as we experience the world of his theatre, a world that is the result of the hermeneutical relationship between the conventions of literary fiction past and present, and Arlt and the world that surrounds him. By calling attention to the fictional nature of his characters, Arlt forces us to consider the possibility of fiction in the reality we live. By presenting imaginary characters that are not only aware of their fictional nature, but also examples of characters affected by other fiction who are struggling to interpret various levels of reality, he is also giving us a look at the insidious ways in which we can be affected by literary conventions in everyday life as well as in our dreams.

It will be our purpose here to show how three of Arlt's best known plays, *300 millones* (1932), *Saverio el cruel* (1936) and *El fabricante de fantasmas* (1936), develop along the lines of metatheatre to present an ambiguous picture of "reality" subverted by another reality which, while being the product of fiction, of imagination, comes to be just as real, to the character or characters experiencing it, as the reality within which it was created. In so doing, Arlt is trying to address the problem of literary conventions and of their general effect on people as instruments of self-inflicted victimization, and, eventually, to the need for revitalizing Argentinean theatre of his time.

300 millones, Arlt's first play written for the independent theatre of Buenos Aires, offers us a look at a world of fantasy and illusion which is completely constructed of conventions that in themselves have come to constitute a reality while coexisting, though on another plane, with Silvia's reality. As a maid in an upper middle class home, Silvia creates and then lives in a world populated by *fantasmas*, which is the world of her dreams; here she is able to escape and find relief from the other world she exists in, the "real" world, which keeps intruding, disrupting her dream world.

Silvia acts out conventions, and the entire action of the play is made up of them, as one can see by giving a quick synthesis of it: an inheritance of "trescientos millones" makes her instantly rich, fulfilling a commonplace dream; she then falls in love with the Galán while on a cruise vacation and gets married. She and the Galán have a baby, but even in the world of dreams things go wrong and the baby is kidnapped by a gypsy, while the Galán is killed in the process; Rocambole, the good guy, vows to find the child. Many years later he does: as Cenicienta she is being abused every way except sexually by the nasty Vulcán, and Rocambole steps in to save her from a fate worse than death just as she is about to be sold off to an old man, who has some obviously lewd plans in store for her. Justice is done and happiness reigns once again. Finally, the daughter, who also has dreams, brings home her own hyperconventional Galancito, whom she plans to marry, and just as Silvia is about to give her blessing, reality intrudes once more in too shocking and grotesque a way to cope with and the only unconventional act of the play takes place: Silvia takes her own life. Her suicide in the real world is a dual expression of rebellion and defense: from the real world she cannot cope with and from the world that she created that is so bound up with the conventions of the fiction of the other as to make it, too, unbearable.

This is a storyline that is completely made up of literary conventions, portrayed here as forming an alternative reality created by a fictional character who, not able to cope with the fictional reality within which she existed, had to escape to another level of existence, a dream world. The dialogue that the *fantasmas* have in the prologue shows both their conventionality and their consciousness of this situation. The Galán that says to Rocambole that "el hombre es esclavo de su sueño . . . es esclavo nuestro" is acknowledging the terrible position of people that are so affected by conventions as to become

victimized and enslaved by them, and this is exactly what has happened to Silvia.⁵ She is conscious of the fact that she is acting and that the others are as well, and they are just as conscious of this fact as she is.

Rocamble: Eso les pasa a ustedes, que son aprendices de fantasmas, pero yo soy Rocamble desde que tengo uso de inteligencia.

Demonio: ¡Que gracia! . . . También a usted lo fabricó la imaginación de un novelista (397).

Galán: Realmente uno hace todos los papeles (397).

Rocamble: Cuando hago el personaje de algún drama, me gusta sufrir y soñar como si fuera hombre de carne y hueso en vez de fantasma (401).

Galán: Perdóname . . ., me olvidaba que estaba haciendo el papel de Galán . . . (416).

At one point Silvia and the Galán even exchange roles, so that she can show him how she wishes him to behave in the world that she is constructing:

Galán (malhumorado): ¿Puede decirme qué papel hago yo aquí?
¿Soy yo o es usted la que se tiene que declarar?

Sirvienta: ¡No se enoje, hombre! . . . Pero usted es bastante estúpido como galán.

. . . .

Sirvienta: Sea positivo. Yo soy una mujer positiva como todas las mujeres. Y a las mujeres no les gustan los prólogos de amor. No, señor Galán, convéznase usted. (*Imperativa*) Le voy a dar una lección. Siéntese en esa mecedora. (*El Galán se sienta; la Sirvienta retrocede, luego se acerca y se inclina sobre él.*) Bueno, haga de cuenta que yo soy el hombre y usted la mujer (414).

But in the end she ends up accepting the convention, a convention that both she and the Galán have rejected as ridiculous throughout their conversation (412-417).

The observations of the *fantasmas* themselves during the brief moments in which the dream action is interrupted by reality reveal the truly tragic point that Arlt proposes. Not only are men slaves of conventions but "debería prohibírsele soñar a los pobres," because "por falta de cultura" they imagine "los disparates más truculentos" (418-19). The poor, then, not only live a reality that is unacceptable, but they should not be allowed to dream because they do not know how. They are the ones that are most affected by what they read in order to escape, and that is what they draw upon to fill their dreams. Of course it is absurd that the *fantasmas* who are protagonists of the dream

of conventions that Silvia has been making come to life should complain about her "disparates más truculentos," especially when one considers that "la autora es ella" (83). But it is precisely with this absurd play between the two levels that Arlt is making his audience aware of the point he wishes to make, and he is able to do it by creating characters that, by reminding us constantly of their fictional nature within the action, force us to look at the issue more clearly.

In the words of Patricia Waugh, "in showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written.'"⁶ Arlt is able to do this and to achieve great dramatic effect and tension in *300 millones* while doing it. In *Saverio el cruel*, which has been regarded as Arlt's best play, the playwright was able to heighten the dramatic tension produced by the dialectic relationship of reality and fantasy and to surprise his audience completely by presenting us with a performance within the performance. Susana has convinced some friends to play a trick on Saverio, a local butter distributor, making him think that she has gone mad and that the only cure would be to destroy the evil colonel that is pursuing her in the world of her madness. Saverio, convinced in his simplicity, agrees to take on the role of the colonel, and as he does so he begins not only to create the personality of his character from his own stereotyped view of the general category "colonels," but also to believe in the reality of his role. Unlike *300 millones*, the story line itself is not constructed with conventions; however, the development of the farce that constitutes the trick against Saverio is, and it is here, in the context of the play within a play, that we see them and their effects.

All the characters are aware of their own theatricality, as they rehearse their roles (Saverio does so in the first three scenes of Act II) and congratulate each other on a performance; the first three scenes of Act III portray the environment backstage just before a performance. In Act I, Pedro, Luisa and Saverio are spectators to Juan and Susana's performance, but at the same time the first two are also characters within the performance, their role being to convince Saverio of the reality of the farce, while all of them are performing the play that Arlt created. This situation of characters that are aware of themselves as characters and of the theatricality of their world points up the theatricality of life in general. We wear masks, according to Pirandello, and do we ever know when the mask is off? Arlt is, in this play, making us aware of this kind of problematic, forcing us to consider just how much of life is actually role play, theatre nested in the performance of life.

And just how much is life affected by certain types of conventions, especially those we get in our literature? This is a question that Arlt also deals with here, as he did in *300 millones*. The characterization and plot in the farce that is created in order to trick Saverio is really a composite of literary conventions of the past. Susana says that she is a "fugitivea de la injusticia del colonel desaforado," but characterizes her role as "semejante a la protagonista de la tragedia clásica,"⁷ while at the same time she sets up an

environment and uses a language the similarity of which to that of the opening scene of *La vida es sueño* by Calderón de la Barca is rather easy to see, and her statement that "parece un sueño todo lo que sucede" (451) makes this all the more obvious. Juan, who is characterized by Susana as a shepherd, brings in elements of pastoral literature, but when she realizes that he "deja mucho que desear como pastor" she sees him for a moment as a Tarzan. She is, she tells Juan, Queen Bragatiana, "fugitiva a la revolución organizada por un coronel faccioso" (453), and here the literary convention is mixed up with something of the everyday reality of the contemporary world. All this is the product of Susana's imagination which, conditioned by her readings, has been improvising a story line. She, or rather her "ingenio," is the source of the idea and thus is the author, while she is also the actress of the farce which, rather than trick Saverio, will lead to her own derangement.

Although we do not ever really suspect Susana of being insane, we are given subtle clues throughout her appearances in the play, which are limited to the first and the last act, that Susana is really not sure as to which world is real. We can see this in some of the comments she makes: "(*Para sí*) Parece un sueño todo lo que sucede" (451); "soy un monstruo disfrazado de sirena. Escúchame, pastorcito, y tú, quien seas que me oyes; huye de mí. Aún estás a tiempo" (452). The following scene, in Act III, is also revealing, though we still don't know how to interpret it:

Juan (*guiñando el ojo a todos*): ¿Quién es el loco aquí?

Todos (*haciendo círculo en derredor de Susana, señalándola con el dedo*): Susana.

Susana (*amablemente*): Y quiero seguir siendo loca, porque siendo loca pongo en movimiento a los cuerdos, como muñecos (478).

These clues are subtle, woven in the dialogue so that we do not really see them because we are not able to distinguish well to what point Susana has taken on her role. Meanwhile, Saverio has been convinced to play the part of the colonel and he dives into his role with an enthusiasm that betrays his need to create a more meaningful world for himself. Such is his enthusiasm that we are led to believe that it is he who is losing touch with reality. Act II begins with the ludicrous rehearsal of his role as the colonel, a role that he is rehearsing according to the context of his own time, within which it more properly exists, thereby pointing out some rather hard realities of contemporary world, such as the fact that "se toma el poder por quince días y se queda uno veinte años" (463). His dream of a weapons salesman who, masked, offers him the latest in weapons technology, contrasts with his decision to buy a guillotine. Though as a colonel he thinks in contemporary terms, Saverio is influenced by conventions of other times, and thus has to have a throne. Here, again, we see various levels of influence of literature on

the imagination that, when coupled with reality, produce an incongruous picture. Saverio, who tells us that acting is "cuestión de posesionarse" (446) seems to be losing touch with reality.

Saverio: Señorita Luisa, ¿es un reino el nuestro o no lo es?

Pedro (*conciliador*): Lo es Saverio, pero de farsa.

Saverio: Entendámonos . . . de farsa para los otros . . .pero real para nosotros . . . (469).

And it takes another convention to convince him not to buy modern weapons:

Luisa: Si ustedes me permiten, les diré esto: en las películas, los únicos coroneles románticos pertenecen al cuerpo de caballería (470).

La "burla cruel," as Juan categorizes it, is carried out to the end, but Saverio, who has been told of the trick that was being played on him, confronts Susana with reality, a reality that has shattered his dream. And it is only now that we see that Susana is the one who is really trapped in her world of fantasy and cannot escape. And we know, because we have been told by Pedro, what has caused Susana's derangement, "probablemente . . . exceso de lecturas . . . una gran anemia cerebral" (456). Was this not, after all, the cause of Don Quijote's "locura"?⁸ But Susana, unlike him, is not able to let go of the world of conventions that her imagination conjured up and, convinced that Saverio is the Colonel, she shoots him. Her last words are revealing:

Susana (*mirando a los hombres inclinados sobre Saverio*): Ha sido inútil, Coronel, que te disfrazaras de vendedor de manteca.

Pedro: Saverio . . . perdón . . . no sabíamos.

Juan: Nos ha engañado a todos, Saverio (486).

The surprise that the ending of *Saverio el cruel* has in store for the spectator has a great dramatic effect and it forces him to become aware. Susana's "locura" is, of course, an extreme example of fiction's effect on us, but it does drive home a point: the dry, sterile repetition of conventions which have caused us to formulate a stereotyped idea of the ideal world are just that, dry and sterile; and they can be dangerous as well, because if we build our dreams on them we ourselves become, in effect, expressions of these same conventions which, as we saw in *300 millones*, may not be any better than the reality from which we were trying to escape through them.

In *El fabricante de fantasmas*, which Arlt brought to the public on the professional stage, he maintains his concern with a theatre aware of itself, but the focus is on the creative process and on the relationship between the author, his creation and the public. A playwright, Pedro, is the central

character, and at the outset he kills his wife Eloísa by pushing her out of a window. Soon after the murder he begins to write plays which make use of theatre as "un medio de plantearle problemas personales a la humanidad . . . en ese caso, mis problemas" (492), projecting unpleasant aspects of reality onto his stage production. His first play so closely resembles the circumstances of the crime he has committed as to prompt a visit from the judge who had reviewed his case after Eloísa's death. As he continues to write, Pedro develops a series of grotesque characters for his dramatic production, fictional representations of the vision of reality he wishes to bring to the public. But his reality is Arlt's fiction, and in it the dividing line between fantasy and everyday existence, as we have seen already, is not at all clear-cut: Pedro's creations come to life, transcend their fictional existence to the point of invading the "real" world.

As in other plays we have examined, there is a purposeful effort on the part of some of the characters to stress their fictional nature and make it evident to the reader or spectator. Most notably, when Pedro tells Martina "(*Con intimidación*) Aunque no lo crea, soy un personaje verídicamente teatral,"⁹ he is not only pointing out his fictional nature on the stage, but he is also implying a fictional level of existence within the mark of reality that constitutes his world, the expression of the roleplay that is part of life. However, Pedro is not able to recognize the same situation, that of fiction acquiring a place within "reality," as regards his own fictional creations.

The fact that a Criado introduces the *fantasmas* to the scene in Act II contributes to breaking down the separation between reality and dream-world, bringing the two levels together and allowing these creations of Pedro's imagination to claim their own existence: "Duda de nuestra legitimidad después de fabricarnos" (523). They carry their complaint even further, telling Pedro that he has not shaped them as he should have:

Verdugo (*a la Coja*): Yo quería ser linotipista. El me obligó a contratarme de verdugo (522).

Prostituta: Escribías el segundo cuadro de tu obra y las palabras se atascaban en tu mente. Es que yo me resistía a convertirme en una mala mujer (524).

The relative nature of what is "real" pervades this play. Even the *fantasmas* have a life of their own that refuses to be obliterated by the fiction of representation. They, his *hijos*, assert it by coming back to Pedro, their "creator," who finds himself haunted by them to the point of being driven to suicide: he is victimized, justly, by his own fiction become real. The audience is forced to become aware precisely of the status of the *fantasmas* as fictional characters who could just as easily be taking on another role, and also to see that fiction can not only affect reality, but become an active and dangerous part of it. Further, by showing fiction that so consistently affects even its own

author, Arlt is causing the public to consider the effect of fiction on itself and its own reality.

Arlt has not forgotten about literary conventions in this play, and we see them specifically in the sixth scene of Act I, where Pedro has a Substituto of himself and the shade of Marina rehearse a scene which he creates, directs and corrects as it is taking place. Much of the dialogue that takes place between them has an openly *folletinesco* flavor, and reminds us of the scene between Silvia and the Galán in *300 millones*. However, Arlt's concern here is more deeply rooted in the *creation* of conventions, and he is addressing those conventions peculiar to established Argentinean theatre, looking at their effects on their "creator" and on the receptor, the audience.

Writing about metafiction, Linda Hutcheon makes a statement which can easily be extended to the metatheatrical mode we are considering; she says that "the point of *metafiction* is that it constitutes its own first critical commentary."¹⁰ In *El fabricante de fantasmas*, Arlt is providing a critique not only of theatre in general, as he has done in the other plays we have seen, but, more specifically, of Argentinean theatre of his time. Pedro, the author, is shown in his relationship with the public. At one point he says:

Fantasmas modelados por mi mente, escúchenme. Necesito que expresen un amor ardiente e inverosímil, con palabras que jamás seres humanos utilizan en la comunicación de sus deseos. *Yo no creo en la eficacia de esos ramilletes de doradas mentiras, pero la gente que acude a los teatros va en busca de lo que no existe en sus vidas.* Podría decirse que las mentiras son para ellos las puertas de oro que se abren a un país encantado. *Nosotros, autores, no nos podemos formar ni la más remota idea acerca de la arbitraria estructura de aquellos países de ensueño, en los que se mueve la imaginación del público.* Como los alquimistas, jugamos con fuerzas naturales cuyos efectos parecen mágicos, pues unas veces la muchedumbre aplaude y otras bosteza (495).

This long quote is highly significant, for we see expressed here the dilemma of the playwright who cannot know beforehand how to please the public and who has to produce without any possibility whatsoever of certainty as to the ability of his work to entertain an audience. But we also see here the pitfall that brings an art form, any art form, to a point of stagnation that threatens to kill it: the trite repetition of the "ramilletes de doradas mentiras," conventions, motifs and devices that have worked in the past and which offer the author a measure of security in terms of the public's acceptance of the product. And Pedro is for Arlt precisely the paradigm that shows us how *not* to make theatre, because he does not respect his public: rather than challenging it by presenting new forms in his theatre, he is willing to feed it the same used-up conventions of the past which entertain it but which in fact

are causing a stagnation which is ultimately damaging to the art form. The Prostituta tells us about his disdain for the audience:

. . . Lloraba el público en el teatro. (*Dirigiéndose a los fantasmas.*)
 ¿Y saben lo que hacía él? Espiando entre bastidores, sacudiendo al crítico por un brazo, gritaba: "Aprendan, así se emociona a la gente" . . . Y, restregándose las manos, exclamaba: "¡Qué estúpido es el público, qué estúpido!" (524)

Pedro's attitude leads him to write plays that will attract viewers and be successful by creating a series of extreme *tipos* obviously taken from the lower strata of society which aim to appeal to the test of a middle or upper class drawn to plays that deal with the tragic situation of the poor. Although the theatre that Pedro is shown as producing for his stage is composed of a series of grotesque exaggerated characters (Jorobado, Prostituta, verdugo, Coja, Ciega), we can see a parallel between this and the kind of theatre that had developed in the region of Río de la Plata, which stressed *criollo* and costumbristic elements. The presentation of certain character types, such as the Italian immigrant, for example, continued to be repeated until Argentinean theatre found itself stagnant and in need of rejuvenation.

It was not by accident that Arlt should have found an audience for his critique in the teatro independiente; these characters of costumbristic presentation of life had, by Arlt's time, become completely overused and, as Frank Dauster comments, "después del florecimiento de la primera década del siglo, entró el teatro rioplatense en un paulatino decaimiento. . . . Se impuso el sistema comercial, . . . y la competencia de los deportes y la radio merbaba seriamente al público."¹¹ The commercial overuse of theatrical forms in an effort to compete for survival in a changing society with new media aimed at entertaining the public is evident in this play, which presents a small-scale parody of the growth of Argentinean theatre in the development of Pedro's dramatic production. It is ironic, and rather sad, that the reaction of the public to this play should have been a reflection of the very criticism that is contained in it, since by rejecting it, the public reacted precisely in the same way as Pedro's public would have: spoon-fed for years, it was unable to appreciate a new form of theatrical expression bold enough to criticize itself.

The three plays we have considered make clear use of metatheatrical techniques to bring the audience to awareness of the state of the medium it is participating in by being spectator to a performance. We have been able to discern a progression in them from laying bare the conventions of fiction and the theatricality of theatre itself in *300 millones* and *Saverio el cruel*, to a direct critique of the state of Argentinean theatre of Arlt's time in *El fabricante de fantasmas*. He first forced the spectator to become conscious of the fact that the influence that fiction exerts on reality can be just as great as that of reality on fiction, if not more. This in turn leads one to consider that fiction, just as

reality, can acquire a trite, humdrum characteristic if it is not rejuvenated and changed. This Arlt does in such a way that, while his meaning can be seen as specific to Argentinean theatre, it may also be seen in a more general sense as referring to stages anywhere. He is warning us as human beings to be conscious of both the great influence of fictional conventions on our dreams and fantasies, as well as of their danger to the theatre of his time--and ours --when constructed of trite, stagnant conventions which may make it of an empty form of expression.

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Notes

1. Raúl Castagnino, *El teatro de Roberto Arlt* (La Plata: Universidad de La Plata, 1964), 89.
2. James J. Troiano, "Pirandellism in the Theatre of Roberto Arlt," *Latin American Theatre Review* 8.1 (1974): 44.
3. Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New Voice of Artistic Form* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1963), 59.
4. June Schlueter, *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 13.
5. Roberto Arlt, *300 millones*, in *Obra completa* (Buenos Aires: C. Lohlé, 1981), 397. All future page numbers refer to this edition.
6. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction, The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (New York: Methuen & Co., 1984) 18.
7. Arlt, *Saverio el cruel*, op. cit., 450.
8. James J. Troiano, "Cervantinism in Two Plays by Roberto Arlt," *The American Hispanist* 4 (29): 20-22, discusses many similarities between Arlt's work and the *Quijote*, though this one, a particularly striking one, seems to have escaped him.
9. Arlt, *El fabricante de fantasmas*, op. cit., 492.
10. Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980) 6.
11. Frank N. Dauster, *Historia del teatro hispanoamericano, signos XIX y XX* (México: Ediciones de Andrea, 1973), 47.