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Roberto Arlt:
Translation and the Construction of Genre

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María Carolina Miranda
BA (Hons)
Universidad Nacional de La Plata
(Argentina)

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INTRODUCTION

Roberto Arlt: Translation and the Construction of Popular Genres

Roberto Arlt is generally considered by critics the forerunner of the Latin American “boom”. Arlt’s innovative style reflects a fascination with the popular and a trenchant social realism fused with fantasy; his oeuvre is considered to have paved the way for later Latin American magic realism. Though distinguished names such as Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar praised his work, still, Arlt has long been considered by lesser figures a marginal voice, a tragicomic commentator on life, an autodidact and journalist, a writer who could not even spell. Only fairly recently has his place in the Argentine canon been granted; elsewhere, Arltian scholars and critics regard Arlt’s work as an incisive portrait of its epoch, a much deserved milestone that secured the author a literary place that his contemporaries tried to deny him.

Indeed, the “intrinsic value” of a particular text may depend not only on the quality of the work itself but also on the background against which it is published. Few artists, be they painters, writers or sculptors, gain fame and recognition as soon as their work emerges. Recognition, when artists achieve it, may be granted after long years of building up a career; for many, only after death. Likewise, literary traditions do not just arise; rather, in André Lefevere’s words, they are “consciously shaped by a number of people who share the same or at least analogous goals over a number of years.”¹ The process resulting in the acceptance or rejection, that is canonization or non-canonization, of a literary text is dominated by discernable factors: the

¹ André Lefevere, *Translation/History/Culture. A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. xi.

manipulation of power, ideology, and the manner in which institutions combine to place texts in and out of a national canon. These factors do not act alone as they operate against a background of readers, writers, publishers and the media who also play an important part in this process. Roberto Arlt is, of course, not exempt from the synchronic and diachronic coordinates that come together to construct a canon in a particular time and culture.

In this introduction we are going to examine the general social, historical and literary backdrop of Roberto Arlt (1900-1942) and propose a general reading of his work while at the same time mapping the cultural background. In order to understand how and why Arlt became such a noteworthy figure in Argentine letters it is essential to examine the wider social, political and cultural context within which he operated. This will help us ‘unwrap’ the broader cultural significance of the author and determine the value of the cultural artefacts he created. We will also provide a brief literary review.

What was the social, economic and political situation of Argentina in Arlt’s heyday? In 1930, after decades of colonial tradition of land monopoly, an absence of industrial development and an economic policy heavily dependent on foreign interests, Argentina was confronted with what would only be the first of a long list of coups d’état – a coup d’état many critics believe to have been predicted in *Los siete locos* – when General José F. Uriburu removed from office the constitutionally elected president Hipólito Yrigoyen.² Argentinean politics had been skating on thin ice since 1912,³ when voting became compulsory by law, and finding a balance

² For a thorough study of the role of the Army in Argentinean history, see Robert Potash, *The Army and the Politics in Argentina* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969). This coup is particularly significant to an understanding of *Saverio el cruel*, a play we analyse in Chapters 5 and 6.

³ The Law Sáenz Peña was passed on 1912 and prescribed, for over eighteen year-old men, the “voto universal y obligatorio” (“universal, and compulsory vote”).

between the opposite interests of the traditional oligarchy and the newly born urban middle class (let alone the working class and immigrant labourers) was proving more and more difficult.

Since the turn of the twentieth century until the politico-economic crisis in 1930, Argentina had enjoyed almost three decades of economic opulence. The country was the biggest exporter of frozen beef, linen goods, maize and oats, and was the third major corn exporter in the world; its annual revenue was comparable to the richest Western countries; oil production shot up to a record breaking one and a half million cubic metres in 1920. On the other hand, the population continued to grow steadily due to the wave of European immigrants while illiteracy rates were amongst the lowest in Latin America. Nevertheless, Argentina's economic policy was still fundamentally colonial as it was based on exporting cattle and agricultural goods to industrialized countries. This would favour a handful of land-owning oligarchs who would, in turn, have power over essential sectors of the economy by controlling the private capital (mainly British) invested in the country and the banking and commercial networks.⁴

By September 1930, when the coup occurred, Yrigoyen's second administration had already been undermined by internal, irreconcilable differences. With the exception of a few loyal *radicales* (supporters of the Radical party Yrigoyen represented), the coup was to some extent welcomed by a vast majority of citizens who wanted a change. The 1920s and 1930s were dominated by a cynical political atmosphere and an intellectually bereft, fraudulent administration which, combined

⁴ See Andrés Avellaneda, 'Clase media y lectura: La construcción de los sentidos', which analyses the socio-economic backdrop of *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas* in Colección Archivos, (ed.) Mario Goloboff, Sudamericana, No 44, 2000, pp. 633-655.

with a weak opposition, projected a poor image of democracy. This, in turn, made people question the whole republican system.

The 1920s and 1930s were marked by a revival of fascist models making the intellectual map of the 1930s a very complex one. A strong right – and extreme right – wing tradition flourished. This sector favoured farming policies and was opposed to industrial development, although it argued in favour of maintaining trading bonds with Great Britain. By the early 1920s, left and right-wing popular nationalist groups had already been established which would long outlive the Uriburu coup. The group Liga Patriótica, the right-wing oligarchic group that started operating in 1919 with the aim of repressing a wave of Buenos Aires strikes,⁵ exhibited the core principles of extreme right-wing nationalism, namely anti-Semitism, xenophobia, Catholic clericalism, anti-anarchism and anti-communism. Members of the Radical Party who frowned upon Yrigoyen's administration, left-wing writers and fellow-traveller historians adhered to this nationalist trend resuscitating the cult of Juan Manuel de Rosas,⁶ the legendary nineteenth-century dictator who was now revived as a grand,

⁵ The Liga Patriótica (i.e. Patriotic League) movement would continue to repress demonstrations for more than a decade. At its height, in the early 1920s, the Liga Patriótica had as many as 300,000 members throughout the country (see Robert A. Potash, *The Army and the Politics in Argentina* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969, pp. 68-9). On the other hand, Caterina claims that despite its aggressive chauvinism and xenophobia, the Liga endorsed economic liberalism, supported the liberal constitution of 1853, and elected its officials. See also Luis María Caterina, *La liga patriótica Argentina: Un grupo de presión frente a las convulsiones sociales de la década del veinte* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1995).

⁶ Juan Manuel de Rosas (1793-1877). Governor of Buenos Aires province (1829-32, 1835-52). Rosas spent most of his youth in the cattle country, where he built his fortune through large-scale ranching. As a full-fledged *caudillo* (political leader) he began his political career in 1820 by leading a force of *gauchos* in support of the conservatives and federalism. After the deposition and execution of Manuel Dorrego (1828) he became the federalist leader. His rise to power represented the rise of the *estancieros* (land owners), the new landed oligarchy based on commercial ranching. In 1829, aided by Estanislao López, he defeated Juan Lavalle, and became governor of Buenos Aires with dictatorial powers. With the help of López and Juan Facundo Quiroga, he waged a sanguinary campaign against the unitarians, destroying their movement, at least temporarily. He surrendered office in 1832, and went on to wage a successful expedition against the indigenous peoples. In 1835, Rosas again became governor; by machinations and arrangements with other provincial chiefs, he assumed the dictatorship of most of Argentina. Rosas's politics were, in practice, anti-federalist despite his formal allegiance. His government became a ruthless tyranny becoming representative of the hegemony of Buenos Aires.

ultra Catholic, horse-riding *gaucho*. More generally, he became an icon representing resistance to foreign domination. Yet, these right-wing and extreme right wing groups shared a number of ideals with other ideological groups such as a nostalgia for a patriarchal Argentina they believed to be disappearing under the ‘malevolent’ flow of immigrants; aspirations towards an authoritarian regime and, thus, a rejection of the liberal, democratic system; and the need to rewrite an Argentinean history that would place the blame for the national defeat in the hands of foreign interests.

It is in this ideological context that publications revisiting national history appeared in great numbers, particularly those aiming at a revival of Rosas’ ideology. Not only historians⁷ but also novelists contributed to foster nationalist, right-wing ideals, often by the process of fictionalising biographies or using “bourgeois” novels as ideologically biased teachings. Particularly outstanding in this respect is Gálvez’s *El hombre en soledad* (1935; i.e. Man in Solitude)⁸ where the protagonist clearly blames the oligarchy’s support on foreign capital, in his view representative of the Anglo-American imperialism haunting Argentina, while defending at the same time the need for a strong, ultra-Catholic and authoritarian government at a time when

Assisted by spies, propagandists, and the Mazorca (a secret political society acting as the police but which degenerated into a band of assassins), he instituted a regime of terror. Though he was adulated in public, successive and continuous revolutions were organized against his rule. Secret revolutionary groups – notably the Asociación de Mayo, founded by Esteban Echeverría – were formed. Ironically, by driving into exile many of the finest minds in Argentina – Juan Bautista Alberdi, Bartolomé Mitre, and especially Domingo F. Sarmiento – he contributed unwittingly to the creation of several classics of South American literature and social analysis. Rosas became involved in a dispute with the United States and Britain over the Falkland Islands. His ambition led him to interfere in Uruguay, where he supported Manuel Oribe. His suspected designs of reducing Paraguay and Uruguay to dependent Argentine states led to two blockades by France and Great Britain (1838-40, 1845-50), greatly hurting Argentine commerce. Resentment of the dominance of Buenos Aires resulted in a final, successful revolution against Rosas. Aided by Brazil and Uruguay, Justo José de Urquiza defeated Rosa’s army at Monte Caseros (1852), and the dictator fled to England, where he lived in exile until his death. Rosas contributed greatly to the unification of Argentina.

⁷ Historical studies include Carlos Ibarguren’s *Juan Manuel de Rosas: su vida, su tiempo, su drama* (1930) and Julio and Rodolfo Irazusta’s *La Argentina y el imperialismo británico* (1934). Among works of fictionalised biographies we find Manuel Gálvez’ *El gaucho de los Cerrillos* (1931) or *La vida de Don Juan Manuel de Rosas* (1940).

⁸ A literal translation of titles such as this are provided thorough for the convenience of readers not familiar with Spanish.

democracy was clearly collapsing (the Uriburu coup constitutes the realist backdrop of the novel). Hugo Wast's anti-Semitic series *El Kahal* and *Oro* (both 1935) constitute yet another clear example of right-wing nationalist ideology. Reading between the lines, it provides a complete list of social ills from the detrimental effects of foreign culture to the outrageous damage of "universal suffrage", the latter referring to the Saenz Peña law passed in 1912 which had not only allowed all eighteen year-old men the vote, regardless of their background, but also made it compulsory.

The boost for Nationalism comes from all directions. There are writers such as Leopoldo Lugones who would favour and preach on behalf of Uriburu's ideals, particularly in his essay *La grande Argentina* (1930). Left-wing writers like Jacinto Oddone (in his *La burguesía terrateniente argentina* of 1930; i.e. The Argentine Land-owning Bourgeoisie) and Scalabrini Ortiz criticized the virtual lack of improvement in the system of land owning since colonial times. Other less noted writers also took part in this historical revisionist tradition. In *La herencia que Rosas dejó al país* (1940; i.e. Rosas' Legacy to the Country) Marxist Rodolfo Puiggrós offered a completely opposed view to that of the canonical-official readings of Ibarguren, the Irazusta brothers and Gálvez.⁹

Other, perhaps more pessimistic writers, such as Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Eduardo Mallea, known as writers of the "*realidad nacional*" (i.e. national reality) published respectively *Radiografía de la Pampa* (1933; i.e. Radiography of the Pampas) and the essay *Historia de una pasión argentina* (1937; i.e. History of an Argentinian Passion). These pessimistic analyses of a sombre Argentinean reality

⁹ See Avellaneda 2000, pp 633-655.

coincide with Enrique Santos Discépolo's legendary lyrics to tangos such as "Yira...yira" (1930) and "Cambalache", tangos that epitomized a decade, painting the lives of those deprived of every hope, left to struggle for survival in a bleak, urban landscape. Furthermore, other popular cultural activities of the epoch also revive nationalist values. The newly born cinema industry, for instance, adopted a nationalist approach without degenerating into an authoritarian or anti-Semitic discourse. In 1937, Mario Soffici's documentary *Kilómetro 111* questioned the British near-monopoly of Argentine railways. Soffici also denounced the local labour exploitation in the hands of foreign landlords in *Prisioneros de la tierra* (1939; i.e. Prisoners of the Land) a film inspired by Horacio Quiroga's "Un peón" (*Cuentos de la selva*, 1918), "Los destiladores de naranja" and "Los desterrados (*Los desterrados*, 1926).¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Buenos Aires literary-historical arena of the period was dominated by two vanguard movements, Florida and Boedo, which differed not only geographically but also aesthetically and politically. Members of the Florida group, named after the opulent shopping street representative of the central, European-like, luxurious life style, tended to focus on mainly aesthetic goals. Jorge Luis Borges, Ricardo Güiraldes, Conrado Nalé Roxlo and Oliverio Girondo may be counted amongst this "patrician" tradition. The Boedo group, on the other hand, represented a suburban wave greatly influenced by the nineteenth-century Russian realists. These would focus on political and social issues, mainly in prose narrative, while the Florida group would also cultivate poetry. Roberto Mariani, Elías Castelnuovo, Leónidas Barletta exemplify the Boedo literati. Both groups maintained their own journals and publishing houses. In spite of the overt differences in style, taste, and social and

¹⁰ It is perhaps worth noting that the screenplay was co-written by Ulyses Petit de Murat and Darío Quiroga (b.1912), Horacio Quiroga's son.

political background, there were numerous friendships between members of these ostensibly opposed groups. Because of the considerable overlap of interests, there were many writers who oscillated between them, Arlt being one of those in particular who transcended narrow partisanship.

Identified thematically with the more socially oriented, low profile Boedo, Arlt's literary, and certainly economic life, changed when he became a sort of *sui generis* assistant to Ricardo Güiraldes – author of *Don Segundo Sombra* (i.e. *Shadows of the Pampas*), which was published in 1926 (the same year, let us note, as Arlt's *El juguete rabioso*), and director of the *avant-garde* magazine *Proa* (which he jointly directed with J.L. Borges, Brandán Caraffa and Pablo Rojas from 1924 onwards).

It is difficult to determine what kind of link bonded the refined, educated *estanciero* (in River Plate Spanish, a person whose income derives from the land he owns) with this rough, uncouth young writer. What is certain is that style-conscious Güiraldes became the father figure Arlt never had, providing him with a job as he turned Arlt into his assistant, and also becoming the young writer's private tutor: Güiraldes would patiently polish Arlt's grammar, lexis and spelling which was said to be abominable. This, of course, resulted in an intellectual patronage many Boedo colleagues frowned at, seeing it as further manifestation of the cultural domination exercised by the Florida writer. Not only would Güiraldes influence Arlt's work – Arlt decided to change the straightforward title of his about-to-be finished *La vida puerca* (i.e. This Filthy Life) for Güiraldes's more poetically playful *El Juguete rabioso*¹¹ – but he would also pose as a potential rival. It can hardly be a coincidence

¹¹ In his *Memorias* (Buenos Aires, Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1974, p. 133), Elías Castelnuovo accuses Güiraldes of being “the one in charge of carrying out its complete prophylaxis, so successfully that he even changed a clear, sound title with a social projection for a muddy, absolutely unclear and unconvincing one.” This refers, presumably, to a process of plastic surgery where little is left of the original limb.

that two novels about adolescent apprenticeship appeared in 1926: Arlt's *El juguete rabioso* and Güiraldes's *Don Segundo Sombra*. The latter work, a nostalgic novel of the pampas, proved to be more popular with the critics and overshadowed Arlt's novelistic debut for many years.¹²

Arlt himself would be very sceptical about being pigeonholed into either Florida or Boedo. Provocatively, in his second autobiography, Arlt defines himself as a "synthesis writer" declaring that, "in literary matters, I read *only* Flaubert and Dostoevsky" (my italics).¹³ Perhaps this is a reflection of his inconsistent attitude towards literature – mocking at the reading choices that chain writers exclusively to one group or the other – since it becomes clear from his writings that he not only took sustenance from both high and low culture but, paradoxically, also resented that dichotomy. Such extremes were for Arlt a mere question of literary taste although it is apparent that he was aware of and resented social asymmetries entirely derived from cultural choices.

Let us pause here for a moment to reflect on the general state of contemporary Roberto Arlt studies. Previous Arlt criticism has tended to take a belletristic approach to his oeuvre. Although Roberto Arlt only gained wide national and international fame long after his death, the mid-to-late 1920s saw the emergence of a large number of Argentine critics who were ready to place Arlt, while stressing his imperfections, as a historian of a tangible political and social conflict. These (usually left-wing) readings constitute to this day a major area in Arltian criticism. This wave was led by advocates of the Boedo group such as Leónidas Barletta, Roberto Mariani

¹² See *Mad Toy*, tr. Michele Aynesworth McKay (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 4.

¹³ 'Autobiografía', *Crítica* magazine (No 13, February, 7th, 1927; translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own).

and Álvaro Yunque.¹⁴ This approach continued later with Raúl Larra's re-editing of Arlt's work; this, in turn, was followed by David Viñas and the group around *Contorno* in the early 1950s.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the beginnings of a second wave of influential studies. At the forefront of this wave we can place Oscar Masotta whose use of Freudian analysis helps locate Arlt in terms of the class struggle.¹⁵ Later, other well-known scholars explored the cultural panorama in more depth and placed Arlt's work within a more complex cultural context. Beatriz Sarlo's contribution proved fundamental for this approach.¹⁶ In the late 1970's and early 1980s Ana María Zubieta briefly revisited the canonical readings of what she terms "la historicidad de las lecturas" (i.e. 'historical readings')¹⁷ in order to reevaluate two of Arlt's most scrutinized novels, *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*. Zubieta focused on discursive plurality, mainly "intertextuality", seen as an aesthetic discursive asset. Starting from the premise that texts cannot be written in a literary void Zubieta traced Arlt's use of Dostoevsky's technique of narration-confession and parody. Particularly interesting is Zubieta's analysis of those novels and her placing them in the context of Arlt's contemporaries, mainly the Boedo group, and the detailed tracking of the different discourses Arlt incorporates and parodies in those works. These texts, she claims, reinforce the particular position Arlt held regarding the Boedo-Florida group

¹⁴ Barletta, Leónidas, 'El juguete rabioso, por Roberto Arlt', *Nosotros* (No 211, December, 1926), pp553-54; Yunque, Álvaro, 'Roberto Arlt', *Nosotros* magazine, Segunda época (No 76, July 1942), pp113-14.

¹⁵ See Masotta, Oscar, *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Capítulo, 1982; first published in 1965) and Viñas, David, 'Arlt y los comunistas', *Contorno* (No2, May, 1954, p 8); *De Sarmiento a Cortázar: literatura y realidad política* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1971) and "Arlt: Robar y salir corriendo", *El Periodista* (No 43, Julio, 1985, unpaginated).

¹⁶ See Sarlo, Beatriz, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1988): 'Arlt: ciudad real, ciudad imaginaria, ciudad reformada', *Punto de Vista* (No 42, April, 1992, pp15-21) and *La imaginación técnica* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1992).

¹⁷ See Zubieta, Ana María, *El discurso narrativo arltiano. Intertextualidad, grotesco y utopía* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1987), p. 12.

polarity. In his collection of essays *Arlt: política y locura* Horacio González referred to Arlt's madness and his relation to politics in what González calls 'political somnambulism.'¹⁸ Concentrating on Arlt's narrative work, mainly *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*, González takes us on a journey through Arlt's chronicles of historical references, madness and cynicism.

In the year 2000, Colección Archivos¹⁹ re-edited *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*²⁰ in a single, annotated volume. Literary critics from France (Maryse Renaud), Spain (Rita Gnutzmann), Mexico (Rose Corral) and Argentina (José Amícola, Andrés Avellaneda, Mario Goloboff, Noé Jitrik, Beatriz Sarlo and Ana María Zubieta) contributed to the critical apparatus of this edition offering a wide range of approaches to the two novels.

As we have seen, Arlt studies have not only been confined to the Argentine arena; international criticism has also flourished mainly focusing on Argentine literary history or providing an account of the social and political reality of early twentieth-century Buenos Aires. Most studies from outside Argentina tend to concentrate on Arlt's major works of fiction, his development and narrative range, but tending to regard particular societal issues as a secondary consideration. Stasys Gostautas, for instance, stresses the importance of Dostoevsky as a model for Arlt's most important novels, a view Jack Flint shares in his *The Prose Works of Roberto*

¹⁸ González (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 1996), p. 6.

¹⁹ The Colección Archivos is an international research entity to which Argentine and international organisations contribute. Endorsed by UNESCO, the project began in 1971 when Miguel Angel Asturias donated his manuscripts to the Bibliothèque Nationale under the condition that the French National Research Centre would edit and publish this work. The aim of the programme is to promote and disseminate Latin American identity through revisiting its writers and presenting a wide, critical reading. Amongst the European and Latin American countries that contribute to the Colección Archivos we find Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Spain, France, Guatemala, Italy, Mexico, Peru and Portugal.

²⁰ *Los siete locos, Los lanzallamas*, 2000.

Arlt.²¹ Aden Hayes concentrates on narrative techniques and strategies, namely the developing relationships between protagonists and narrators in Arlt's novels and some of his short stories.²² In *Roberto Arlt o el arte del calidoscopio*²³ Rita Gnutzmann is to be found a pioneer of his reception in Germany. Gnutzmann presents a study of Arlt's narrative strategies and techniques. More recently, in *Roberto Arlt, innovación y compromiso*,²⁴ Gnutzmann offers a deeper analysis of Arlt's narrative and journalistic career. In her last book on the *porteño* writer, Gnutzmann dedicates a chapter to Arlt's *Aguafuertes*, touching on Arlt's relation to piano, tango and jazz music and also offering a revised bibliography. Another international critic writing on Arlt is Glen S. Close whose *La imprenta enterrada, Baroja, Arlt y el imaginario anarquista*²⁵ concentrates on 'conspiracy fiction'. Close relates Arlt's work to international names such as Dostoevsky, Pío Baroja, Turgenev, Conrad and Henry James, all of whom, Close claims, present the character of the anarchist as an imaginary figure giving rise to a rich literary heritage.

Likewise, Germany has produced a number of interesting studies on Arlt. In 1971 and 1973 German translations of *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas* were published in Leipzig but it would not be until 1992 that another reference to Arlt by Rita Gnutzmann, is to be found in *Der Hispanoamerikanische Roman*.²⁶ In *Roberto Arlt, una modernidad argentina*,²⁷ editors José Morales Saravia and Barbara Schuchard compiled a collection of essays that attempt to explore the cultural value

²¹ Stasys Gostautas, *Buenos Aires y Arlt: Dostoievski, Martínez Estrada y Escalabrini Ortiz* (Madrid: Ínsula, 1977); Flint, Jack, *The Prose Works of Roberto Arlt* (Durham: University of Durham, 1985).

²² Hayes, Aden. W., *Roberto Arlt: la estrategia de su ficción* (London: Tamesis, 1981).

²³ Gnutzmann, Rita, *Roberto Arlt o el arte del calidoscopio* (Vitoria: Universidad del País Vasco, 1984).

²⁴ See Gnutzmann, *Roberto Arlt, innovación y compromiso* (Murcia: Campobell 2004).

²⁵ Tran. César Aira (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo Editora, 2000).

²⁶ See ed. Roloff, Volker and Harald Wentzlaff-Eggebert (vol 1, Darmstadt: Wissensgesellschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: 155-166 and 337-339).

²⁷ Gnutzmann (Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2001)

of Arlt from a German perspective. That volume was the result of a colloquium held in 2000 in Bonn, and includes works by critics such as Anne Saint Sauveur-Henn, José Morales Saravia, Wolfgang Matzat, Roland Spiller, Rita Gnutzmann, Markus Klaus Schäffauer, Barbara Schuchard, Florian Nelle, Walter Bruno Berg, Andrea Pagni and Miguel Vitagliano.

Lately, Paul Jordan's *Roberto Arlt: A Narrative Journey* (2000), provides a textual and contextual analysis of Arlt's works. Concentrating mainly on *Los siete locos*, *Los lanzallamas*, *El amor brujo* and *Aguafuertes españolas*, Jordan addresses the problematic of Arlt's ideological context, particularly the Florida-Boedo factor, trying to trace the genesis of *El juguete rabioso*. An analysis of six texts published prior to Arlt's first novel is used to explicate Arlt's first attempt at writing professionally. Following this attempt to delineate Arlt's genesis, we are presented with an exhaustive textual and historical analysis of both *Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*. Jordan also analyses Arlt's reflections on Argentine culture in his *Aguafuertes españolas*, a series of articles published in *El Mundo* by 1935 (compiled in 1936) after spending two years in Spain where Arlt had worked as the political correspondent of *El Mundo* newspaper.²⁸ More recently, Jordan has edited *Fragmentos*²⁹ a forthcoming volume where he presents an overview of Arltian criticism in Spanish, English and Portuguese by contributors such as José Amícola, Rita Gnutzmann, Silvia Saítta, and Jordan himself.

In this thesis, however, we intend to expand on these insights by employing recent theoretical insights in the field of Translation Studies. Intertextuality and translation play a much greater role in the construction of genres than commentators

²⁸ Jordan, Paul, *Roberto Arlt: A Narrative Journey* (London: King's College London Hispanic Series, 2000).

²⁹ (Forthcoming) Brazil: University of Santa Catarina.

give credit for. When a new text translates into a culture the new – target – cultural environment inevitably transforms both text and the surrounding interpretation. As cultural theorists working on Roberto Arlt, we are confronted by various tasks. The first one is to decode the social meaning of his texts. This unpacking of cultural signification is by no means easy as we are faced with closely knit historical, cultural and social codes. The second undertaking we are faced with is to explore Arlt's oeuvre within a wider cultural framework in order to try and understand its relationship to the popular genres. Arlt, as was the case with many late Victorian writers (to make a comparison with British culture at perhaps a similar point of cultural formation), was a typical man of letters equally capable of tackling different genres: newspaper reportage, journalism, detective fiction, the novel, proto science-fiction and theatre.³⁰ The only genres Arlt does not seem to touch upon, perhaps surprisingly in the light of his prolific output, are poetry, biography and (serious) autobiography³¹ – though this very absence of personal reflection on his career and writing development perhaps needs to be understood in the context of a wider South

³⁰ In 'Telling as a Dénouement in Charles Dicken's *Great Expectations* and Roberto Arlt's *The Rabid Toy*', a paper delivered at the 'Dickens in Latin America' conference organized by the School of Humanities and Sciences of Education at the University of the Republic (Uruguay), Lee Williams addresses the creation of a new type of Latin American narrative that combines popular culture adventure fiction with lyrical, high-culture passages. <http://www.fulbright.org.uy> (visited 10 December 2005). A good example of the Victorian polymath man-of-letters would be George R. Sims: journalist, novelist (his oeuvre includes subgenres such as the detective story), poet, and playwright (he is closely linked with the Adelphi drama).

³¹ In 1926, Arlt published an 'autobiografía humorística' ['humorous autobiography'] in *Don Goyo* magazine (14 December, 1926). Curiously enough, Arlt recurrently manipulated biographical details. He signed his first pieces as Roberto Godofredo Christophersen Arlt while his birth certificate confirms Roberto as his only name; 'Me llamo Roberto Godofredo Christophersen Arlt y nací una noche del año 1900' (Arlt, Mirta, *Prólogos a la obra de mi padre*, Buenos Aires: Torres Agüero, 1985) p. 55. Equally, Arlt would alter his date of birth: 'He nacido el 7 de Abril de 1900' ('Mi traje y el teniente coronel', *Don Goyo*, 2 March, 1926). Apart from that comic autobiography, there is general critical consensus that several of his pieces contain autobiographical references. His first novel, *El juguete rabioso*, is perhaps the one that has been most recurrently identified as featuring a protagonist, Silvio Astier, moulded after Arlt himself. Equally, autobiographical comment is also found in several of his *Aguafuertes*. See Saïtta, *El escritor en el bosque de ladrillos, una biografía de Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2000).

American inferiority complex when confronted by the vast array of texts labelled in various ways as the artefacts of prestigious cultures.

Translation is central to the development of any literature, but it has a special importance in nineteenth and twentieth-century Latin America, not least since it has affected the founding of national literatures and their renovation with respect to European and U.S. traditions. As Waisman points out, originality is certainly a most “sensitive issue for Latin American writers because it is often linked with cultural and political independence and is magnified in importance by the disparities between Latin America as a political and economic periphery and Europe and the United States as both symbolic and real centers of power.”³² Indeed, following Lawrence Venuti’s suggestions,³³ the study of translation can bring about new approaches to recurrent issues in the history of English and American literature.

Thus, we shall endeavour here to explain why Arlt’s work proves so pivotal on the Argentine cultural scene and how by misappropriating popular genres he reflects the cultural values of his time. In particular, we aim here to provide a new analysis of his first novel, *El juguete rabioso* (1926). (Arlt’s second and third novels, *Los siete locos* (1929) and its sequel *Los lanzallamas* (1931), have already been the subject of an extensive critical output.) Nevertheless, we will also comment on some of Arlt’s *Aguafuertes* series published in the newspaper *El Mundo*, as well as examine in some detail areas of Arlt’s cultural production which have received less attention –

³² See ‘Ethics and Aesthetics North and South: Translation in the Work of Ricardo Piglia’ by Sergio Waisman http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_language_quarterly/v062/62.3waisman.html, accessed 3 January 2006).

³³ Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995).

notably, his fiction and his work for the theatre, especially *Saverio el cruel* (1936), one of his most arresting works.

This thesis is organised in seven chapters, each reflecting the richness of Arlt's oeuvre but also assembled according to the methodological approach employed here. Thus, Chapter 1 introduces the general historical and socio-cultural setting we believe underlies Arlt's cultural universe.

In Chapters 2 and 3 we concentrate on Arlt's first novel, *El juguete rabioso*.³⁴ Whatever *El juguete* might be, it is certainly not a work to be taken at face value. Attacked when first published on the grounds of it being badly written and inconsistent, *El juguete* is an intricate, polyphonic network allowing many possible readings that need to be looked at in greater depth in order to disclose its multi-layered code. Aiming to understand its role as the milestone in Argentine letters critics claim it to be, we shall reread the novel in the light of Bakhtinian studies. Using, notably, the notions of heteroglossia taken from Mikail Bakhtin and Bernstein's concepts of abjection and *ressentiment*, these chapters will concentrate, mainly, on the topoi of abjection, *ressentiment* and the Carnavalesque. We also endeavour to explain how the themes are linked and why they prove fundamental for the comprehension of Arlt's first novel.

In Chapter 4 we tackle a popular genre approached by Arlt: detective fiction. The development of the detective story was largely the result of a three-way exchange involving Britain, France and North America. This constant transatlantic dialogue also maps detective fiction in the Americas. Although considerably less prolific than

³⁴ Translated by Aynesworth (2000) as *Mad Toy* but also referred to, particularly in the U.S, as 'Rabid Toy'.

their British, American or French counterparts, Hispanic American authors have cultivated the genre in its different shapes and forms. What we propose here is to look at the cultural map that serves as the background for the detective fiction of Roberto Arlt. We will examine a number of detective stories penned by the *porteño* author, trying to establish Arlt's contribution to Argentine *literatura policial*, one which clearly reflects the constant influence of literature from both the Old and the New Continent.

In Chapters 5 and 6 we focus on the theatre, as Arlt the playwright is frequently not only marginalised but often completely ignored. Despite the fact that literary figures such as Julio Cortázar praised Arlt's prose writings, only too often they also considered his drama 'dispensable'. For practical purposes, let us agree with Ordaz who believed that Arlt 'fué [sic] por autonomasia, el autor del movimiento independiente.'³⁵ These chapters will argue that Arlt's late 'conversion' to theatre was very much the product of a particular historical moment. By framing a popular genre within the somewhat more sophisticated technique of metatheatre, we will try and see how Arlt overcomes the traditional weakness of plot, which we associate as a characteristic of melodrama, by inflating the element of socio-political critique and exploiting 'Grand Guignol' devices such as the 'public' decapitation on stage. We believe that in the case of *Saverio el cruel*, perhaps the most enduring of his plays, Arlt stretched his creativity even further, introducing (perhaps reviving) and subverting the conventions of a popular genre such as melodrama to deliver a particular political point. So much so, that such misappropriation of a popular genre will, we claim, allow Arlt to fight his conscience, a conscience already in revolution.

³⁵ Ordaz 1957, p. 28.

though that a revolution, as we shall argue here, is not strictly political but mainly socio-cultural.

Chapter 7 presents examples of translation issues, particularly in relation to *Saverio el cruel*. Following Hale's argument, which places translation at the centre of the construction of popular genres such as the western (or pioneer) novel, the detective story, the Gothic novel and early science fiction,³⁶ we analyse the role of translators in the theatre particularly in relation to the notion of "interpretative communities" which was put forward by Stanley Fish in the 1980s (i.e. specialist groups of readers or users of texts who read texts against the grain for their own purposes). In short, what we aim is to provide the necessary theoretical framework to explain and justify certain cultural problematics encountered when translating *Saverio el cruel*.

In the conclusion, taking into account the overwhelming role translation has played in our cultural history, this thesis questions the role of translation in the formation of literature, particularly in the formation of an Argentine national literature. What for Borges is perhaps an aesthetic, erudite game for Arlt becomes one of 'illicit' misappropriation. Indeed, in Argentine literature this aesthetics of 'creation as theft' is possibly epitomised by Arlt who perhaps exploits his condition on the margins by recycling from both the very core of the canon as well as from the peripheries. Thus, we can see Borges and Arlt as the two extremes of perhaps the same process of ultra 'domestication' for local consumption. At the centre of the canon we find Borges, whose intellectual game of incorporating into the translation of

³⁶ See Terry Hale, 'Popular Fiction', in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, vol. 4 (1790-1900), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp 371-381.

foreign texts an irreverent tone ultimately serves as a highbrow aesthetic that, in turn, constitutes his trademark. Similarly, Arlt's brand of misappropriation and re-contextualization represents a mixture of both low and highbrow cultural practices, recycled for a particular socio-cultural readership, which is likewise his trademark. Ultimately, both Borges and Arlt are part of prevailing national interpretive communities for whom translation provides a creative route into original writing.

Finally, a translation of the *Saverio el cruel* is provided in the appendix, both as a reference point for the discussion of the construction of the play in Chapter 7 and as a potential model for future adaptations, "tradaptions", creative rewritings, reworkings, or, indeed, misinterpretations.

CHAPTER 1

Inventing the City: Cultural Transformation and Roberto Arlt.¹

I.

‘Pero que el siglo 20 es un despliegue
de maldad insolente, ya no hay quién lo niegue.
Vivimos revolcaos en un merengue
y en un mismo lodo, todos manoseaos.’²

To be able to understand where Arlt stood, in cultural and in literary terms, we need to pause and assess the cultural transformation that Buenos Aires underwent at the turn of the century. As a modern nation, Argentina began to thrive only with the commencement of the twentieth century. It is essential, therefore, that we examine these changes closely since they will concern more than just the geography of the city. From this transformation a new way of thinking would be born; a new cultural and literary universe would arise. All this would affect every aspect of the city’s cultural practices, from literature to the theatre, from popular music through to publishing, from the cinema through to architecture and the fine arts.³

It is therefore essential that we acknowledge and realise how the social, ethnographic and political changes can alter culture itself and the way in which that culture is created. As British commentators such as Williams stressed, popular culture,

¹ We follow here Raymond Williams’ definition of ‘culture’ as a social practice. In *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), Williams outlines three general categories in his definition of culture. Firstly, there is the ‘ideal’ culture –high culture or the state of or process of human perfection (in Arnold’s terms, ‘the best that has been thought and said in the world’; Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1960, p.6). In short, the kind of culture usually understood to be included by the term when spelled with a capital “C.” Secondly, there is culture as a documentary record (texts and practices of culture). Thirdly, there is the description of a particular way of life. It is this ‘social’ way of thinking about culture that proved crucial for the founding of the culturalism movement since it allowed society to be viewed from an anthropological stance (the description of a way of life, the expression of meaning and value, and as the ‘clarification of the meanings and values implicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture.’ (Williams 1965, p. 7.)

² *Cambalache* (1934), a popular tango by Enrique Santos Discépolo.

³ For an interesting approach to popular urban music, the *porteños*, and the cinema see Blas Matamoro, ‘La canción popular urbana’ and Bibiana del Brutto, ‘Los porteños y el cine’ both in *Buenos Aires 1880-1930: La capital de un imperio imaginario*, (ed) Horacio Vázquez-Rial (Madrid: Editorial Alianza, 1996, pp. 362-377 and 378-394 respectively).

in the best sense of the term, is, above all, self-made. Though the culturalism movement⁴ was particularly strong in the England of the 1950s and 1960s, it was only much later that the methodology began to be widely appreciated further afield.⁵ Before we seek to extend this line of research to the Argentine situation, however, let us review the initial work of Hoggart and Williams, particularly in relation to the analysis of working class cultural changes within the United Kingdom.

Despite marked differences, the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams established the basis for the cultural studies approach to popular culture.⁶ What unites these two theoreticians is the common belief that by analysing the culture of a society it is possible to reconstruct the ideas and behaviour of the people who produce and consume the cultural texts and practices of that society. Instead of passive consumption, they particularly stress the active production – or ‘human agency’ as Hoggart terms it – involved in cultural construction.

In *The Uses of Literacy* Hoggart describes changes in working-class culture, roughly between the 1930s and 1950s, particularly in light of the evolution of mass publishing and entertainment.⁷ Although Hoggart bases his distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ culture on both personal experience and academic research, the main

⁴ The term ‘culturalism’ was coined by Richard Johnson, a former director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Johnson uses this term suggesting the presence of a certain theoretical coherence involving the works of Hoggart and Williams.

⁵ With regard to France, for example, see Brian Rigby’s inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Hull, 17th January 1994, ‘Hoggart en France, “Popular culture” in France and England: the French translation of Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*’ (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1995).

⁶ Both Hoggart and Williams develop positions in response to Leavisism. It was F. R. Leavis and his followers, however, who initiated an educational space for the study of popular culture in Britain. Taking Mathew Arnold’s principles, Leavis sought a solution to what he perceived as the cultural crisis facing Britain in the 1930s. Leavisites believe that the twentieth-century is marked by a significant cultural decline; a culture of ‘standardisation and levelling down’; ‘the citizen ... must be trained to discriminate and to resist’. What Hoggart concentrates on is not the ‘good culture/bad culture’ binary as Leavisites do, but the ‘good past/bad past’ opposites. Instead of the Leavisite ‘organic community’ of the seventeenth century, Hoggart’s ‘good past’ is 1930s working-class culture. In a nut shell, the culture Hoggart celebrates is largely the one Leavisites ‘arm’ to resist. See F. R. Leavis’ *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930) Q. D. Leavis’ *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978) and Leavis and Denys Thompson’s *Culture and Environment* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977).

⁷ The book is divided in two parts. The first, ‘An “older” order’, describes the working class culture of Hoggart’s childhood in the 1930s. The second, ‘Yielding place to new’ depicts a traditional working class culture under threat from the new forms of mass entertainment of the 1950s. All references to *The Uses of Literacy* are to the London: Chatto and Windus, 1967 edition.

difference between his approach and that of the Leavisites is that in Hoggart's case what he attacks is the decline on the 'moral seriousness' underlying cultural products aimed at the working class as opposed to a general 'moral decline' among the working class. Hoggart believes that the working classes have the ability to resist the manipulation of mass culture by means of their natural ability to adapt and assimilate what they want and ignore the rest. For Hoggart, the working class culture of the 1930s expresses the 'rich full life', which is marked by a strong sense of community. This is a culture that is on the whole made by and for the people. Good examples of this communal 'culture made by the people', a self-made entertainment, are going to the pub or a day's outing to the seaside in a charabanc.⁸

Although the socio-political background is clearly different, we believe that the type of upper working/lower middle class public that most of the time Arlt was writing for (or about) in Argentina approximates to the one Hoggart describes as an 'earnest minority' in Britain.⁹ Indeed, Arlt's newspaper readership, in particular, comprised a similar working class and lower-middle class constituency. What both strata have in common is not only the various forms of culture (and of creating culture) but also a similar local, personal, communal way of life. This sector of the English working-class started organising themselves, getting involved in their community, supporting Trade Unionism, working for their local MPs, engaging in their local chapels and making good use of the public libraries, increasingly reading 'quality' newspapers, and taking advantage of part-time education. In Arlt's case, what we see is that more often than not this social stratum was also keen to further its own material improvement or to make up for the cultural and intellectual background they lacked.

Perhaps the major difference between Arlt's readership and the one Hoggart describes is the fact that the Argentine 'new, upper working/ lower middle class' was mainly made up of immigrants. This is not to say that there was no 'native' working

⁸ Hoggart, pp. 120-1.

⁹ Hoggart, p. 260.

class but, as we will show later, that the increase of the foreign population remained the essential factor throughout the period in question. It is important to notice that the demographic and social changes we will describe – brought about partially by the modernization of the city of Buenos Aires – were accompanied by major setbacks for the ruling oligarchy, notably the election of Hipólito Yrigoyen, the first democratically elected president of the country, in 1916.

This was a crucial event in the reshuffling of the political cards of the country. Until 1912, only Argentine born males who were over 18 and had access to the political arena could vote; that is men who were part of the political and cultural elite. This left a majority of the national and immigrant population unrepresented. In 1912, the then president, Roque Sáenz Peña, passed a law that regulated the voting system, offering universal and compulsory suffrage for the first time. First exercised in 1916 when Yrigoyen was elected, this Ley [Law] Sáenz Peña (as it went to be known) left the upper-class politicians stupefied and bewildered, though at this stage it is unlikely that the extent of their loss of political power and prestige was fully appreciated. According to Aurora Sánchez,¹⁰ ‘[l]a reforma electoral de 1912 y el triunfo del radicalismo los arrolló y los dejó perplejos, incapaces de comprender que ello en realidad significaba la primera manifestación de lo que habían preconizado: la integración y nacionalización del caudal inmigratorio.’¹¹

II. Populating the country

The fact that Argentina was an immense, unexplored, under-populated country is a concept that has shaped national politics at least since the 1880s. In his *Radiografía de la Pampa* (1933), Ezequiel Martínez Estrada describes Buenos Aires as ‘La cabeza

¹⁰ See ‘Una crítica al sistema: católicos y nacionalistas’, in *Buenos Aires 1880-1930: La capital de un imperio imaginario* (1996) pp. 139-163.

¹¹ Sánchez, p. 152.

de Goliath' [the head of Goliath];¹² the capital city where the rich and the poor stacked together represented the head of a weak giant whose blood coagulated, unable to flow to the rest of the immense and distant body. Likewise, ex-president (1868-1874) and educator Domingo Faustino Sarmiento writes in his autobiographical novel *Facundo* (1845) that 'el mal que aqueja a la Argentina es la extensión' ['Argentina's affliction is its size'].¹³ According to Vázquez-Rial, this idea that Argentina was an under-populated country turned it into one of the major immigration destinations in the West, a condition that lasted at least half a century and contributed to the shaping of the country's national identity. Historically, both left and right-wing politicians seemed to agree that a country with 10.8 inhabitants per square kilometres was an under-populated country, something that led to the embracing of huge currents of migration, mostly from Southern Europe.

Most progressive politicians based their theories of under population on the calculation of the potential productivity of the fertile lands of the country if there was a sufficient population to cultivate them. In short, the resources of a country the size of Argentina were massively under-exploited. What these commentators did not bear in mind was the fact that the few who owned the land, essentially cattle farmers who already had their connections with the port of Buenos Aires, only needed the workforce they already had (occasionally increasing the labour force as and when needed). This miscalculation is at the heart of these debates since cattle ranching and farming always demanded fewer workers than the population of Argentina could provide.

¹² In his 1933 essay *Radiografía de la Pampa*, E. Martínez Estrada talks about the 'monstrosity' modernization brought about to Buenos Aires, something the author believes has not happened in European cities undergoing the same process.

¹³ For many critics, *Facundo* is the first true Argentine novel. It narrates the story of Juan Facundo Quiroga set against the background of Rosas' regime. Sarmiento describes the physical and cultural aspects of Argentina in a manner resembling a factual study, examining political, historical and educational ideology. Between 1874 and 1880 Sarmiento was Senador Nacional [National MP] and Ministro de Educación [Education Minister] under the administration of Nicolás de Avellaneda. Although Sarmiento's contribution to national politics involved different areas, he is best remembered for his input into the national education system. The anniversary of his death, 11 September 1888, is a national holiday when Argentina commemorates the "Día del maestro" [Teacher's Day].

Demographically speaking, the country's population already supplied more than enough manual labour.¹⁴

What is true is that with the advent of mass immigration the physiognomy of the country was altered. According to Martín Sagrera, this lack of correlation between land production and the population determined the quantity and the distribution of the inhabitants in Argentina.¹⁵ Vázquez-Rial points out that despite the intention of promoting rural population levels, what increased was the urban population, especially in Buenos Aires and its conurbation – so much so that it escalated from 27 per cent of the total urban population in 1869 to 37 per cent in 1895 and 53 per cent in 1914.¹⁶

By the end of the nineteenth century, Argentina was, demographically speaking, beginning to take shape. In terms of social class, the 1900s proved crucial for the consolidation of the lower-middle and middle class. Buenos Aires residents, the majority of whom were first generation Argentines, started getting involved not only in the workforce of the city (through both manual labour and the liberal professions) but also in politics, the educational sector, trade and cultural production. As Vázquez-Rial highlights, this 'new' social class became 'los mayores clientes de una cultura a la que contribuyeron a su vez a transformar'.¹⁷ This industrious middle class advocated a moderate materialism; they believed in hard work, had a strong sense of duty and believed that social mobility was possible through education, business or industrial activity or participation in public administration.

This ethnographic phenomenon triggered great social, economic and ultimately physical mobility, shaping the physiognomy of the city. The turn of the century witnessed the redesign or relocation of certain neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires such as Caballito, Palermo and Flores (towards the north of the city), a reshaping that was

¹⁴ See Vázquez-Rial, p. 22.

¹⁵ Contrary to traditional wisdom, Martín Sagrera argues that if we relate demographics to agricultural production Argentina was, more than once in our history, an overpopulated country. See *Argentina superpoblada* (Buenos Aires: Libros de América, 1976).

¹⁶ Vázquez-Rial, p. 24.

¹⁷ Vázquez-Rial, p. 52.

structured around the more prestigious residential areas that the upper-middle class claimed as their own. This rising upper-middle class started acquiring week-end homes in distant suburbs; they soon needed a summer chalet on the Atlantic coast, preferably in the seaside city of Mar del Plata, something that became the status symbol to which every family aspired. Finally, to consolidate their social and economic position, the family pantheon in the new Chacarita cemetery inaugurated in 1886 would reflect, through marble and brass, the family status (the traditional Recoleta graveyard was already completely occupied with the mausoleums of the patrician class). But not everybody who aspired to this step up the social ladder could achieve it. The middle and lower-middle class were left far behind.

For those belonging to the lower-middle class the dream of their own house would be the ultimate goal. Up to the mid-1900s, the '*casa chorizo*'¹⁸ was the type of house best suited for the immigrant population wishing to step on to the property ladder. Generally consisting of a L-shaped house with rooms lined one after the other with a succession of patios, the *casa chorizo* would become the most typical construction amongst this social stratum. With a lounge facing the street, the house could be extended upwards or to the back when the family grew or had the financial means to expand; it could even provide an income as one or more of the rooms could be let out. This construction allowed social and economic mobility as its facade could be enriched or altered as the family became wealthier. It also provided financial security as these houses could be turned, as very often occurred, into *pensiones* [i.e. lodging-houses] or the main lounge transformed into a small retail business for the support of the family. In those days, however, most of the Buenos Aires population lived in rented accommodation. The monthly rent was the main worry of this sector of the middle

¹⁸ Literally, this means "sausage house" because, as and when money was available, it could be extended backwards, the layout resulting in a succession of rooms and patios in the manner of a string of sausages.

class whose expenses also included groceries, bought on credit, and instalments owing to tailors, all of which became due at the end of the month.

The system of neighbourhood community and trust soon gave rise to the figure of the '*avivado porteño*' ['smart Alec']. This petty delinquent, who suddenly moves out of his *barrio* leaving his debts unpaid (or *muertos* [i.e. corpses] as these are called), became a typical character in popular literature. The middle classes had a strong inclination towards saving and investing, both ultimately secured in property. When the house was paid for, letting out the rooms of the extended part of the house was the preferred means of income generation. The haute bourgeoisie, on the other hand, intent on maximising the income to be derived from well-placed, often inherited, plots of land, began to construct taller buildings in a way that would also change the aspect of the city.

Yet, perhaps the most interesting of the architectonic characteristics of the city were the *conventillos*. These buildings, generally large residential houses where entire families would squeeze into a single rented room with communal facilities, not only provided a profitable income for the owners but also constituted numerous social microcosms. Indeed, as Vázquez-Rial highlights, because the *conventillos* mainly sheltered an immigrant population of the most varied backgrounds and trades, they rapidly became the object of sociological and linguistic study.¹⁹ There can be no doubt that they constitute a thoroughly cosmopolitan institution, one which had important linguistic and cultural repercussions for Argentine culture in general and Buenos Aires' argot in particular, inspiring literature, music (particularly tango) and theatre alike. Created as a rapid, temporary solution to the problem of immigration, the first *conventillos* sprang up towards the south of the Plaza de Mayo (which is, effectively, the centre of the city). The appalling sanitary conditions, the overcrowding and the lack of privacy, were overlooked in favour of the convenience of location for the men

¹⁹ See 'Tu cuna fue un conventillo. La vivienda obrera en Buenos Aires en la vuelta del siglo' by Vázquez-Rial, in *Memorias de las ciudades* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1996), pp. 254-264.

getting to work and the easy access (the first were very near the port). Not surprisingly, the *conventillo* became the chosen lodging for most newcomers. The communal patios provided an opportunity to earn additional income as the women used them as laundries, a service they offered to ‘los de afuera’ (non residents). Despite their impractical layout, those proprietors who could afford it fuelled a building programme. These new *conventillos* were built with little or no improvement to the original layout. Mainly owned by wealthy Argentine families or richer immigrants who did not hesitate to take advantage of their fellow country men: the proprietors of the new *conventillos* cared very little about the sanitary conditions or the poor spacing distribution of their clients. Most barely even saw their properties, the rents being collected by an *encargado*, an intermediary in charge of dealing with the tenants.

Despite the precarious condition of these residents, the provincial government made very little effort to improve the situation and relocate *conventillo* dwellers. The Comisión Nacional de Casas Baratas, a project to build cheap housing for the general populace, and the implementation of credits offered by the Banco Hipotecario Nacional, only favoured a few, mainly those working in public administration, since having a regular job was a condition of occupation. Railway companies also built houses for their workers but the majority of those wanting to leave the *conventillo* had to move further and further outside the city. Despite this, this institution did not disappear. Vázquez-Rial indicates that as late as 1945 there were approximately 10,000 *conventillos* in Buenos Aires, which by then had a population of 2,500,000. Significantly, 250,000 people still lived in *conventillos* – some 10% of the population.²⁰

²⁰ Vázquez-Rial, p. 58.

II. Modern Argentina: Negotiating Public Space

There is no doubt about it: at the turn of the century Buenos Aires was a vibrant, rapidly growing city. The centenary of the Revolución de Mayo (the May Revolution that in 1810 marked the real commencement of Argentina's independence from Spain) brought an air of grandeur to the city;²¹ important international guests visited the city (including, in 1910, Princess Isabel from Spain), exhibitions, shows, and parades promised progress towards a better, more European capital city. Indeed, Argentina enjoyed a reputation for growth and development. La Plata, the capital of the province of Buenos Aires, was built according to plan in 1882;²² the seaside resort of Mar del Plata, 'la Biarritz de los *porteños*', was developing, together with a succession of *estancias* and country houses modelled on the design of French *châteaux*; followed by the glitter of the centenary celebrations.

Behind this elaborate façade, however, all was not well. This striking opulence coexisted with a contrasting reality of tenants' strike (rents had risen dramatically and in 1907 the tenants went on strike), the degradation of the overcrowded *conventillos*, the instability of employment, industrial unrest, anarchist attacks and electoral

²¹ Between 1880 and 1930 the city of Buenos Aires underwent major transformations. Back in the 1860s, British railways companies were given licence to run a tramway line. By 1871 trams covered a network of 160 km. (by then the city had 192,000 inhabitants). In 1897 Buenos Aires had its first electric tramway. The *calle Florida*, the first cobble-stoned street of the city, was the chosen place of residence of the elite. Later in 1910 it became a pedestrian precinct and soon established itself as the most prestigious commercial and cultural area of the city. Between 1913 and 1930 the first plans to build sky-scrapers began and the provincial municipality (the local government) started making clear efforts to embellish the city. French architect and landscaper Carlos Thays was appointed director of Paseos de la Municipalidad; under his administration 142,320 trees were planted in the streets and 20,000 in parks. He founded the Jardín Botánico and the Parque Japonés, the first *porteño* amusement park. The local government set out to adorn Thays' urban designs. In 1902, artist and local MP Ernesto de la Cárcova promoted a bill to ornament the city; the project included the purchase in different European countries of a number of bronze and marble sculptures and fountains that were placed, and remain to this day, in public places such as boulevards, squares and gardens surrounding public buildings.

²² La Plata was founded by Governor Dardo Rocha on November 19, 1882. The city was planned to serve as the capital of the province after the city of Buenos Aires was declared a federal district in 1880. The urban design of the city was carried out by urban planner Pedro Benoit, while there was an international architectural competition to choose the designers of the various government buildings. Also known as "la ciudad de las diagonales" ["the city of the diagonals"]. La Plata has the shape of a square with a central park and two diagonal avenues, north-south and east-west.

corruption. In Vázquez-Rial's words, "[e]l resto—la otra realidad—no contaba: ni los barrios populares, ni el trabajo de los talleres, ni la marginalidad vecina al centro y al Puerto como en cualquier ciudad."²³

The impact of the socio-economic process that began in the 1890s altered not only the urban ecology of Buenos Aires but the whole life of its inhabitants.²⁴ As Beatriz Sarlo has noted, Buenos Aires became an interesting phenomenon both as a physical space and as a cultural myth. The city was now the stage on which modernity had stamped its changes and Buenos Aires "los exhibe de una manera ostensible y a veces brutal, los difunde, los generaliza."²⁵ Alongside this process of physical alteration, the city represents a combination of symbolic and physical changes. According to Sarlo:

La idea de ciudad es inescindible de las posiciones que suscitan los procesos de modernización y es inseparable también de otra idea: ha llegado, al fin, a colocar a Buenos Aires en la perspectiva que había animado los proyectos institucionales del siglo XIX: la ciudad ha vencido al mundo rural, la inmigración proporciona una base demográfica nueva, el progreso económico superpone el modelo con la realidad. Se tiene la ilusión de que el carácter periférico de esta nación sudamericana puede ser ya leído como un avatar de su historia y no como un rasgo de su presente.²⁶

At the same time, the idea that Buenos Aires is a city of disproportionate dimensions in relation to the rest of the country coexists with the idea of the "megapolis"; that the '*Cabeza de Goliat*' governs the body.²⁷

²³ Vázquez-Rial, p. 60.

²⁴ See Juan José Sebreli's essay on how the bourgeoisie and the middle class lived in 1900s Buenos Aires; 'Elementos de la vida cotidiana' in *Buenos Aires 1880-1930: La capital de un imperio imaginario*, (ed.) Horacio Vázquez-Rial (Madrid: Editorial Alianza) 1996, pp. 212-277.

²⁵ Sarlo, 'Modernidad y mezcla cultural' in *Buenos Aires 1880-1930: La capital de un imperio imaginario*, (ed.) Horacio Vázquez-Rial (Madrid: Editorial Alianza, 1996, pp. 181-212), p. 183.

²⁶ Sarlo, pp. 183-4.

²⁷ In *Radiografía de La Pampa* Martínez Estrada also talks about the failure of civilization in the Americas as the city could not respond to the dreams and projects of the 'founding fathers': despite every effort Buenos Aires is nothing more than a degraded image of Europe. A less pessimistic vision is to be found in Eduardo Mallea's *Mistoria de una pasión argentina* (1937). For Mallea, the construction of a nation can only be a fruitful activity.

In the 1920s and 1930s a number of ideological and political myths were constructed in Buenos Aires. The most important of these was the vampiric metaphor of the port-city sucking dry the resources of the country in favour of European capital.²⁸ Whichever way one looks at it, the notion of the city became pivotal for the construction of culture in the national thinking. In the Argentine tradition, the idea of the model of the urban space overshadows that of the rural. In that respect, the Argentine intelligentsia aligned itself with the philosophical views of Sarmiento who believed the city was superior to the country. As discussed in his *Facundo*, Sarmiento's urban utopia became not only the stage for Argentine culture but also a constructed space: "un espacio imaginario que la literatura inventa y ocupa: Arlt, Marechal, Borges."²⁹ The city was talked about, discussed, the centre of an imagined social utopia, the canvas of modernity. According to José Luis Romero, the productivity of the urban (in other words, the culture created by the city's "urban agents" – note the terminology – meaning writers, artists and also audiences) constitutes the cultural and institutional tradition of Latin American cities.³⁰ What becomes the problem is the city itself, both utopia and distopia. Argentina, with the construction of the modern cityscape, thus enters the theoretical debate about modernity and postmodernity.

At the turn of the century, the city epitomised the symbolic machine of the modern world. Buenos Aires was heading towards a model of the heterogeneous, of cultural and social fusion, of the juxtaposition of public and private spaces, the ultimate arena where social mobility is possible. Anonymity, as Benjamin puts it, cited with approval by

²⁸ In the 1930s, Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz started his campaign of denunciation through a series of publications in the magazine run by the Radical political movement FORJA (Fuerza de Orientación Radical de la Juventud Argentina), accusing British imperialistic interests of the economic exploitation of the country (see for example 'Política británica en el Río de la Plata' (1936) and 'Los ferrocarriles, factor primordial de la independencia nacional' (1937) to name but two). His thesis is that the railway system, built with British capital, 'deformed' the national territory, making the poor and the rich converge in Buenos Aires. This vision of financial and social conspiracy would, in later decades, form a major plank in the Peronist ideology.

²⁹ Sarlo, p. 185.

³⁰ See Romero, *Latinoamérica: las ciudades y las ideas* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1976).

Sarlo, becomes the most important feature of the modern city, which it fills with the most varied mixtures of nationality, social background and trade. “El espacio público pierde sacralidad:”, Sarlo explains, “todos lo invaden, todos consideran la calle como lugar común, donde la oferta se multiplica y, al mismo tiempo se diferencia, pero siempre se muestra ante el deseo que ya no reconoce los límites de las jerarquías.”³¹

New technology and machinery transform people’s relation to their city in that they alter time and space creating futurist utopias about the speed of means of transport, illumination and the new, huge closed space as an alternative high street or market. Benjamin’s analysis of the modern city, notably the incomplete “Arcades Project” (which focuses, of course, on Baudelaire’s Paris), places the urban scene as the orbit of European culture of the XIX century. The metropolis grants room for the transaction of values in all their forms; it equally shelters different interests, principles and aesthetics, diverse politics, cultural mixture brought by immigration and the internal migration from the countryside. This new aesthetic-ideological formation is characterised by the juxtaposition of discourses and practices in the sense that the modern city will always be heterogeneous.

Gramsci’s concept of ‘hegemony’ is also useful in comprehending the city.³² Both politically and culturally, Gramsci’s concept describes the process by which a dominant class leads, and not solely rules, a society through the exertion of moral and intellectual leadership. Gramsci suggests that in a society in which there is a high degree of consensus and social stability (in other words, when the subordinate classes appear to actively support and subscribe to ideals, values, objectives and cultural meanings), the prevailing power structures have managed to bind and incorporate the subordinate

³¹ Sarlo, pp. 187-8.

³² Although Gramsci develops this chiefly as a political concept to explain why socialist revolutions have not occurred in Western democracies in the face of the oppressive and exploitative nature of capitalism, it has also been used to account for the negotiation of cultural practices. See Antonio Gramsci’s *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (tran./ed.) Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971) and also *Cultura popular y cultura de masas. Conceptos, recorridos y polémicas*, Ana María Zubieta, ed. (Buenos Aires/Barcelona/México: Paidós, 2000). In later chapters we address the particular case of Arlt’s relationship with canonical and peripheral literature not only from the point of view of himself as a cultural agent but also himself and his characters as readers.

classes into the politically and culturally dominant structure. None the less, popular cultural practices challenge this hegemony, while hegemonic and ‘subordinate’ cultural practices are continuously negotiated and disputed, not least, as we shall see, in an Argentine setting.

As a public space, then, the street becomes the battleground for symbolic, social and cultural occupation. As Hoggart reflects, outdoor spaces, particularly public parts of the city such as post offices, telephone kiosks and bus stations, all mirror change. Nevertheless, “in the working class shopping and amusement areas” – as Hoggart further surmises – “the old idiom [...] persists. [...] In the working-class area itself, in those uneven cobbled streets to which until recently motor-cars seldom penetrated, the world is still that of fifty years ago.”³³ The main characteristic of this ‘other’ town centre of the working-class is its drab untidiness, its baroque and messy style. Another element that characterises the working-class town centre is its noise which makes it “sound like a small fairground.”³⁴ Such is the background for working-class living; such is the starting point for popular culture.

In Buenos Aires, and especially in the pages of her magazine *Sur* (1931), patrician intellectual Victoria Ocampo and the upper-class intelligentsia exercised cultural hegemony by becoming patrons and supporters of modernism. Ocampo firmly believed that the publication of *Sur* was essential as “[un] instrumento de purificación del gusto” [an instrument for the purification of taste] especially in a city like Buenos Aires where immigration (which is associated with lower classes) had left a blatant physical mark suggesting “stylistic anarchy.”³⁵ As Sarlo notes, “el modernismo propondría un programa de homogeneización frente al *volapuk* estilístico de origen migratorio.”³⁶ Likewise, literature would also play an important part in the promotion and construction of modernity. The street seems to be the most recurrent symbolic space

³³ Hoggart, 1967, p. 120.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Sarlo, 187.

³⁶ Sarlo, p. 188.

(‘hipersemiotizado’ as Sarlo puts it) in the works of the 1920s and 1930s Argentine literati. From Oliverio Girondo to Raúl González Tuñón, from Arlt to Borges,³⁷ the street becomes both history and the present:

[...] por un lado la calle es la prueba del cambio, por otro puede convertirse en el sustento material por el cual la transformación se convierte en un mito literario. Y, más todavía, la calle atravesada por la electricidad y el tranvía puede ser negada, para buscar detrás de ella el resto de una calle que casi todavía no habría sido tocada por la modernización, ese rincón imaginario del suburbio inventado por Borges bajo la figura de las *orillas*, lugar indeciso entre ciudad y campo.³⁸

In Argentina, that social and cultural diversity, the product of demographic change, is reflected in the quantity and quality of the cultural and literary production. With the flow and borrowing of different aesthetics, the period is remarkable for its complexity diversity. The richness of the literary system also conditions the population’s reading habits. Hoggart, too, remarks that the most manifest aspect of cultural change in English working-class life centres on the reading habits of this group:³⁹

During the mid – and late – nineteenth century their reading was likely to be wide, solid and inspiring. [...] They were some of those from whom the organisation of Services Education during the last war had real meaning and use. They made good use of the public libraries [...]. They have helped to increase the sales of ‘quality’ papers and journals, and have contributed to the post-war expansion in further and part-time education organised by voluntary bodies, the University and Local Education Authorities.⁴⁰

³⁷ It is worth noting that Raúl González Tuñón (and to a certain extent Arlt as well) belonged to the Boedo literary current; Borges and Girondo on the other hand were representatives of the more patrician Florida movement. See Oliverio Girondo’s *Veinte poemas para ser leídos en el tranvía* (in *Obras completas*, Buenos Aires: Losada, 1990, second edition); Raúl González Tuñón’s *El violín del diablo* (Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1926) and *Miércoles de ceniza* (Buenos Aires: Gleizer, 1928); Jorge Luis Borges’ *Poemas (1922-1943)* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1943); and Arlt’s novels *El juguete rabioso*, *Los siete locos*, *Los lanzallamas* and *El amor brujo* (in *Obras completas*, Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 1981).

³⁸ Sarlo, p. 188.

³⁹ Hoggart, p. 202. Hoggart also describes the reading habits of young men on National Service -- men who, for two years are cut off from home, family and relationship ties, become open to the “both fragmentary and sensational” effect of reading. This group tends to read popular crime novels as well as comics, gangster novelettes, science and crime magazines, the newer-style magazines or magazine/newspapers and the picture-dailies.

⁴⁰ Hoggart, p. 261.

III. Cultural Heteroglossia, Literature and Journalism

In a similar way to Britain, the 1920s and 1930s in Argentina are characterised by the rise of new readership; magazines, newspapers and serialised publications which catered for a lower and lower-middle readership – a popular, socially, ideologically and politically stratified new readership. At the same time, in order to promulgate high culture amongst those who were otherwise excluded, a left-wing reformist trend also aimed to change cultural dissemination by creating popular libraries, publishing houses, magazines and *centros de conferencias* (public buildings for lectures and other cultural activities). Behind of this socio-educational reform we can see an intention of integrating the immigrant population and the masses by ‘educating’ them into the democratic, secular culture of the country. In the literary arena, this is achieved through the construction of a literary canon which includes translation (mainly of Russian and French realism) and humanist poetics. But it is sensual gratification which motivates the new ‘kiosk literature’, a mixture of the erotic, the sentimental and fantasy. Sarlo points out that magazines such as *Caras y Caretas* (launched in the late 1890s) updated and modernised themselves to meet this popular demand. This involves featuring a diverse mixture of articles on cinema, literature, popular music, current affairs, fashion and comic strips.⁴¹ The modern discourse of heterogeneity, cultural and racial mixture also informs the media. Newspapers such as *Crítica* and *El Mundo* (founded in 1913 and 1927 respectively) together with the cinema and the theatre reflect a readership which comprises old *criollos*, immigrants and first-generation Argentines of foreign parents. Inevitably, all this mixture and juxtaposition engenders nationalism and xenophobia awakening nostalgia for a city that has been transformed, for a past that has been lost.

⁴¹ See Sarlo, p. 191.

This sense of looking back to a lost Buenos Aires generated a two-fold cultural reaction: firstly, an image that is more constructed than real (which is the case of Borges' early work such as 'El Sur' (1944)); or, secondly, the bohemian exploration of the *cultura obrera* (i.e. working-class culture), the poor neighbourhood, the port, the prostitutes and the mixed races. Debates about cultural legitimacy proliferate, especially in the literary magazines: the '*criollos viejos*' could not easily come to terms with the idea that the language of literature could also be produced by a writer whose parents had not been born in Argentina, whose Spanish was at best approximative and whose work was marked as foreign. The cultural and ideological density of the period characterises these decades and its repercussions stretch across the entire cultural spectrum: literature, cinema, tango music, architecture, modern music, jazz-bands, painting, the theatre and, of course, journalism.

Indeed, journalism will become the modern genre par excellence and significantly, with his *Aguafuertes*, Arlt would be at the very core of such heterogeneous discourse (newspaper writing would be his only constant paid job).⁴² In the pages of the new magazines and newspapers a socio-cultural battle took place, one in which politics, ideas, cultural and literary values were in constant negotiation. Arlt's role in this battle is attested by his *Aguafuertes*. Pedro Orgambide, who compiled the *Nuevas aguafuertes porteñas*,⁴³ describes them as "uno de los testimonios más fieles de un tiempo de crisis y definición."⁴⁴ Gnutzmann notes that it is surprising that

⁴² The *Aguafuertes* was a series of newspaper articles on current issues, illustrated by sketches and caricatures by Bello, published in *El Mundo* for more than ten years. Gnutzmann points out that Arlt's first column of the series appeared on 5 August 1928 as "Aguafuertes porteñas". On 14 August, Arlt signed himself with the initials 'RA'; while from the 15th onwards his full name appears (2004, p. 135). Saitta (2000), on the other hand, traces them back to mid-May (some short stories were published in early May). The study by Daniel C. Scroggins on Arlt's *Aguafuertes* (*Las aguafuertes porteñas de Roberto Arlt*: Buenos Aires (Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1981) seems to confirm Saitta's date of 14-15 May for Arlt's first unsigned column.

⁴³ (Buenos Aires, Hachette, 1960).

⁴⁴ Arlt, Orgambide, ed., 1960, p. 11.

Orgambide has not seen the parallel between the approach taken by Arlt's *Aguafuertes* and that of the Parisian 'flaneur' described by Walter Benjamin.⁴⁵

What is indisputable is that Arlt's name increasingly became a national and international brand as his columns were syndicated in other Latin American countries: some of Arlt's later *Aguafuertes* made it into the Mexican and Chilean press. Under the columns 'Tiempos presentes' and later 'Al margen del cable', Arlt's articles were published in Mexican newspaper *El Nacional* between July 1937 and December 1941. Arlt was probably unaware of the extent of his international readership, but *El Nacional*, which had only been founded in 1929, was widely read in Mexico. In general, Arlt's chronicles lagged about a month behind their original appearance in the *porteño El Mundo*.⁴⁶ In the 1920s it was not a common practice for journalists to sign their articles; the fact that the *Aguafuertes* carried an attribution to Arlt is further confirmation of the author's stature. Indeed, not only was Arlt's name familiar to readers of both the Argentine *El Mundo* and the Mexican *El Nacional* but, as Larra argues, his *Aguafuertes* also increased the print run of the former.

The rise of newspapers and magazines is perhaps also crucial for the construction of detective fiction, a genre that would not have proliferated in the manner in which it did without the remuneration offered by syndication and large circulation figures. Arguably, a detective fiction tradition is not possible before a culture has a periodical press which is substantial enough to disseminate it effectively. This is a subject to which we return in Chapter 4. Demographic changes are also crucial in this process as it is only when the new readership is economically stable (with monthly

⁴⁵ See Rita Gnutzmann, *Roberto Arlt: Innovación y Compromiso. La obra narrativa y periodística*. (Murcia: Campobell 2004). p. 140.

⁴⁶ In 'Varias notas periodísticas de Arlt', Rose Corral comments that from 1938 Arlt's column in *El Nacional* received privileged editorial status. By 1939, this Mexican newspaper published an average of two columns per month by Arlt. (<http://sololiteratura.com/arlt/arltvariasnotas.htm>. Accessed 11-05).

salaries as opposed to weekly wages) to take up magazines and monthly publications on a regular basis, ideally marked by subscription, that the genre first gets translated and, secondly, gives rise to locally produced imitative productions which may, in turn, provide a model for further local production.

In addition to journalism, literature is another system that has undergone wide-scale transformation. In the early 1900s, modernity decreed that literature should no longer be a closed entity but a new, open system that incorporated a public dimension which was, in turn, further modernised by new technologies: “[s]e trata, a no dudarlo, de *literaturas*, cuyo plural indica diferencias de problematización estética y diversos universos de público lector.”⁴⁷ It is difficult not to agree with Sarlo when she comments that Arlt is perhaps the epitome of such a mixture: the equal integration of high and low cultural references, the fusion of a heterogeneous range of popular science with high and low literary culture, together with references to mesmerism, DIY manuals and shoddy translations of popular literature. What characterises Arlt’s oeuvre is a clear reference to what Sarlo calls “el saber de los pobres” (i.e. ‘the knowledge of the poor’), a knowledge acquired “en manuales baratos, en bibliotecas populares que funcionaban en todos los barrios, en talleres de inventores descabellados que habían sufrido el encandilamiento de la electricidad, la fusión de metales, la galvanización, el magnetismo.”⁴⁸

This “knowledge of the poor”, discussed by Sarlo, is also observable amongst the British working-class. Hoggart illustrates the tendency to self-improvement by means of reading “cultural publications which is from one aspect improper, which is inspired by too strong and too vague an expectation [...]”⁴⁹ Such autodidact readers were, of course, nothing new. Indeed, the tradition dates back to the Victorian era. But

⁴⁷ Sarlo, p. 191.

⁴⁸ Sarlo, p. 192. For the social uses of para-scientific knowledge see Robert Darnton’s *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968); for social uses of scientific knowledge also see Lynn Marrill’s *The Romance of Victorian Natural History* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁴⁹ Hoggart, p. 253.

the “urge for culture” described by Hoggart amongst the English working class of the 1930s, particularly amongst the “earnest minority”,⁵⁰ can also be observed in Argentina. In Arlt’s oeuvre, this is clearly reflected not only by the amount of reading in which his characters engage (mainly in the novels), but also by the type of literature they consume. More often than not, Arlt’s men tend to have been self-taught by means of reading DIY manuals (mostly popular amongst young males), kiosk novellas and magazines. Interestingly, Hoggart highlights a similar tendency to “handymanship” and “hobbies proper” amongst the working-class British male.⁵¹

Arlt is one of the Argentine writers who most frequently draw attention to the miscellaneous social and cultural mixture that characterised the Buenos Aires of the 1930s. More particularly, he regularly notes the constant struggle of the rising proletariat to access the city’s culture. According to Osvaldo Gallone, “Arlt sacará a las calles la literatura de los feriantes, los tenderos, los oficinistas de cuello duro de la pequeña burguesía porteña, las prostitutas, los locos, los baldados, los rufianes.”⁵² As Gallone puts it, “[l]a ciudad de Roberto Arlt es una urbe de fracasados, de delatores y de marginales.”⁵³ To a certain extent, and as Diana Guerrero suggests,⁵⁴ Buenos Aires is a city that Arlt denounces in his work: the city of the office worker, of monotony, of the mediocre petty bourgeoisie constantly trying to do better than their parents, a city where a conformist middle class is slowly consolidating power.

Arlt’s literary eclecticism is reflected in all his writing, from his novels to his theatre, short stories and newspaper articles. Perhaps the novel that best exemplifies the complexities of such a mixture of styles is *El amor brujo* (1932). Arlt’s last novel, curiously the one most neglected by the scholars, is a critique of both the moral

⁵⁰ Hoggart, p. 260.

⁵¹ ‘The counters of working-class paper shops, towards the weekend, are crowded with a great variety of what the trade calls the “hobby press”, such as *Angler’s News*, *Cage Birds* and *Bird Fancy*, *Smallholder*, *Popular Gardening*, *Practical Mechanics*, *The Woodworker* and *Cycling*. There are in all about two hundred and fifty periodicals devoted to sports, hobbies and entertainment’ (1967, p. 267).

⁵² See Osvaldo Gallone’s ‘La literatura: del naturalismo al expresionismo’, in *Buenos Aires 1880-1930: La capital de un imperio imaginario* (1996, pp. 311-325).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See Guerrero, *Arlt: El habitante solitario* (Buenos Aires: Catálogos, 1972).

universe of the middle class and its sentimental mythology. What is interesting here is that Arlt criticises them at the same time as he exploits the very structure of the *folletines* (serialised novels) that were so beloved by this social group. In this way, Arlt seeks to undermine all “su *gender system*, su modelo de felicidad, su ideología romántica y sus posiciones sexistas, su saber acerca de la sociedad, el matrimonio, el dinero y la psicología del amor.”⁵⁵

Arlt’s cynical views are not restricted to his narrative work. In his *Aguafuertes porteñas*, the author combines journalism and fiction. This allows Arlt to develop topics, profiles and stories – or invent ‘macrostructures’ as Sarlo puts it – about lower middle class life within the limitations of the column. Goldar provides a taxonomy of the topics of the *Aguafuertes* which involves ten categories: 1- Christianity; 2- Hypocrisy; 3- The Picaresque and the Urban Prototype; 4- Work and Morality; 5- The Worker; 6-The Working Class; 7- Bureaucracy; 8- Pessimism; 9- The Writer or Literary Man; and 10- Humanism.⁵⁶ But it is not only lower-middle-class morality that Arlt targets in the *Aguafuertes*. In addition, he visited jails and hospitals, he ridicules the inconsistent sexual morality of the patrician order and the institution of marriage; he criticises the meanness of the petty bourgeoisie and the aspirations of this class which is anxious to climb the social ladder. But he also reflects on the stupidity of the bourgeois family generally, as he perceived it. Likewise, in his theatre Arlt would repeatedly expose middle class moral laxity.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Sarlo, p. 192.

⁵⁶ Goldar, Ernesto, *Proceso a Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1985) pp. 146-151.

⁵⁷ Such desacralization of bourgeois values would also have been familiar to an Argentine audience from the performances of the comic monologues of Florencio Parravicini (1876-1941). Born to a wealthy, patrician family, this *señorito bien* [gentleman] inaugurated a new subgenre in the popular theatre: the satiric monologue. Parravicini’s performance consisted in the rendition of a monologue that was half-scripted and half-improvised, a practice that led to the accusation that he had “degraded national theatre” (See David Viñas ‘El teatro popular: Vaccarezza y Parravicini. Morcillas, lapsus y traición’ in *Buenos Aires 1880-1930: La capital de un imperio imaginario*, 1996, pp. 353-361). With the excuse of suffering from a poor memory, Parravicini filled his script with improvised social commentary, political views and remarks about current affairs. His style soon became synonymous with wit, intelligence and originality. In the theatre jargon this was called ‘meter morcilla’, ‘morcillar’ or ‘morcillero’ [‘morcilla’ literally means ‘black pudding’]. This technique of filling the gaps of memory with literally whatever came to mind, allowed the comic to get away with many audaciously ironic comments since he effectively distanced himself from the written dramatic text. (Viñas, 1996, p. 353).

IV. Conclusion

As we have discussed in this section, at the turn of the century Buenos Aires was an energetic city in the throes of massive urbanisation. According to Beatriz Sarlo:

Buenos Aires, 1920: si toda periodización es discutible, esa década, quizás como ninguna otra, presenta el cambio de manera espectacular. No se trata sólo de las vanguardias estéticas, de la modernización económica sino de la modernidad como estilo cultural que penetra el tejido de una sociedad que no se le resiste, ni en los proyectos de sus élites políticas ni en su densidad de vida.⁵⁸

This new era brought about spectacular cultural transformations that would continue to affect Argentina in general and Buenos Aires in particular for decades to come (roughly from 1880 to 1930). From the aesthetic to the political, from the every-day life of the country to its culture, literature, cinema, theatre traditions and popular music, not forgetting the urban planning (however improvised), the effect of the economic force of the ‘modern’ city in the making would make itself felt. Arlt was born with the new century, grew up amidst the changing cityscape, and was from childhood – institutionally and emotionally – educated within the new cultural heteroglossia.

Inspired by daily newspapers, Parravicini’s ‘periodismo teatral’ [‘theatre journalism’] as Viñas calls it (1996, p.354), became the principal voice of a community that had been, until then, silent. According to Viñas (ibid), this illegal role of social commentator with the ‘right to tell the truth’ rested, from the beginning of his career in 1904, on one major psychological factor: Parravicini was a dandy, *un señorito bien*, a gentleman, and as such had acquired that right at birth. Nevertheless, his monologues became so insolent, audacious and disrespectful towards the upper classes that Parravicini was considered a traitor to his own class. Viñas points out that this ‘traición... se corrobora en cada una de esas “morcillas” generalmente insolentes y provocativas con las que si “halagaba el gusto popular”, al mismo tiempo, aunque fuera de manera ambigua y efímera (y por la que finalmente se hizo perdonar), desacralizaba a la ciudad de los *gentlemen*’ (original italics, 1996, p.355).

⁵⁸ Sarlo, p. 183.

CHAPTER 2

El juguete rabioso

I.

El juguete rabioso,¹ commenced by Arlt in 1920 but only published in 1926 after undergoing considerable editorial revision, is the first of Arlt's four novels. In 1925 the literary magazine *Proa* published two chapters of the work, which was then still called *La vida puerca* (i.e. This Filthy Life),² 'El rengo' (i.e. 'The Lame Man') and also 'El poeta parroquial' (i.e. 'The Neighbourhood Poet').³ 'El poeta parroquial', however, did not become readily available to the public until almost seventy years later⁴ since it was cut from the manuscript. As we mentioned earlier, Ricardo Güiraldes' patronage consisted not only on arranging for the publication of a number of texts by Arlt but also the supervision and 'polishing' of his young disciple's untutored style. Arlt's first novel epitomises this, so much so that the stigma of his 'unpolished' writing is one that would haunt Arlt to the end of his literary career.

El juguete is perhaps the most autobiographical of all Arlt's novels. Both the protagonist and the author of the novel are sons of poor immigrants, autodidacts, who would read anything they could get their hands on, and to this extent share a common autobiography. The novel itself recounts the adventures of Silvio Drodman Astier, a

¹ All references to *El Juguete rabioso*, are to the 1985, Losada edition. All English translations of quotations refer to the most recent translation, *Mad Toy*, (tran.) Michele McKay Aynesworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

² As we saw earlier Roberto Arlt, following the advice of his influential mentor Güiraldes, decided not to employ the more trenchant title *La vida puerca*. *El juguete rabioso* was considered a much milder option for the Florida group who frowned upon Güiraldes' "prophylaxis". At the time Arlt published the above extracts in *Proa* the title of the novel was still *La vida puerca*.

³ 'El Rengo', *Proa*, (No 8, March, 1925), a fragment of chapter four; 'El poeta parroquial'. *Proa* (No 10, May, 1925).

⁴ Ricardo Piglia, a major Argentine authority on Arlt, uses the 1926 original version as his basis for his 1993 edition, including 'El poeta parroquial' as an appendix, the final chapter that had been edited out in previous editions. Aynesworth, following Piglia, also includes the missing chapter in the translation (see *Mad Toy*, Aynesworth, 2002).

youth of humble social origins whose main aspiration is to become a thief. With crude, raw realism, Arlt narrates Silvio's journey of initiation. Despite the stylistic differences of the two writers, the sordid neighbourhood on the outskirts of Buenos Aires where Silvio's struggle for survival occurs is as mythical and fantastic as Borges' city.

The aim of chapter 2 is to reread *El juguete rabioso* from the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of *heteroglossia* and the *carnavalesque* and the notion of 'social banditry' proposed by Hobsbawm.⁵ Such an approach needs to be read together with chapter 3 where Michael André Bernstein's notions of *abjection* and *ressentiment* are examined. Before that, and since some, if not all, of Arlt's novels will be unfamiliar to an English-speaking readership, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of *El juguete*. This summary will, however, also include some important interpretive material.

In chapter one of the novel, we meet the street-wise Silvio who is initiated into reading, a habit that will be more than a passionate interest, becoming an escape route from the chaotic Buenos Aires of the early 1920s: a fiercely competitive urban maze. An anarchist Andalusian cobbler rents his collection of *folletines* (serial instalments of novels) to young Silvio. Ponson du Terrail's Rocamboles becomes Silvio's hero and inspires his repeated attempts to bridge the gap between his exuberant imagination and the sordid reality around him. Together with Enrique Irzubeta and Lucio, both young but already corrupted (not to say unemployed) neighbours, they institute 'El Club de los Caballeros de la Media Noche' (i.e. 'The Club of the Midnight Knights'), a gang which allows them to live out their fantasies of criminal glory derived from the reading of pulp magazines. Crime and artistic creation (the protagonist is renowned in the neighbourhood for having successfully fired his own home-made cannon) in fact

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000). See footnote 34, below.

overlap in Silvio's attempts to affirm his existence and make the culture of his parents' adopted land his own. His efforts echo the ongoing struggle of immigrants everywhere, particularly in peripheral *barrios* (neighbourhoods), to stake their claim in a new land. Silvio learns at an early age that money is the only means of providing for his basic needs, particularly education. A recurrent theme in the novel is access not only to monetary capital but also cultural capital. Silvio's rebelliousness does not attain a political dimension. He is not so much a politically engaged character as a destructive non-conformist underclass drifter who threatens the social order. Significantly, one of the greatest crimes the gang perpetrates is breaking into a school library to steal books, the selection being made on the basis of their resale value. Silvio evaluates several volumes as also worth stealing on the grounds that they can be adapted to antisocial ends: they consist of scientific texts and Baudelaire's poems. Books represent an exchangeable commodity and Silvio is always aware of this fact. This reflects further on the protagonist's (like the author's) own illegitimate access to cultural capital, a capital neither of them could aspire to through education due to their migrant, working class background.

In chapter two we are presented with Silvio's humiliating employment by rapacious booksellers whose shop he eventually attempts to burn down. Silvio finds himself starved and exploited by other immigrants whose luck has been greater than his own. Indeed, he is left to survive in that brick jungle without a shred of sympathy, not even from those who share the same immigrant background. Growing up in the working-class neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, he is forced to move from one *barrio* to another as chance and poverty dictate.

In chapter three Silvio suffers further setbacks when his natural sense of initiative and inventive nature backfire resulting in his dismissal from a mechanical

apprenticeship at the *Escuela Militar de Aviación* (Military School of Aviation). The same sergeant who, impressed by his inventions, initially gave him the post, later dismisses him on the grounds that what they need is tough, hard working and obedient cadets and not intelligent, free thinking and creative ones. Feeling degraded and afraid to go home with the bad news, Silvio spends the night in a rented room he has to share with a homosexual youth who confides to Silvio how his private tutor seduced and corrupted him. The following day, on the way back home, Silvio buys a gun but fails in an attempt suicide.

A change of luck occurs in chapter four when Silvio starts working as an wrapping paper salesman. Now he must compete in the urban maze, bombarded at every turn by the babble of voices and the petty meanness of the retailers. In a sense he is a plaything of the city. Primarily through his nocturnal, underworld adventures, he comes to know the madness and inhumanity – the poverty, privation, and cruel exploitation – that flourish amid the metropolitan chaos. Silvio meets a horse-tender, *el Rengo*, who, tired of his petty and unrewarding crimes, has been working on a more remunerative project: breaking into an engineer's house and stealing the money from the safe. Silvio agrees to work with him but eventually betrays his friend who is caught and sent to prison.

Silvio represents a character doomed by his social condition, and determined by his background: in his first 'honest' job he is exploited and abused. At the *Escuela Militar de Aviación* he is told to read and study in order to get on, to become someone, but, paradoxically, even as he does so, he is accused of being an anarchist and then a dreamer. This eventually costs him his job. Finally, Silvio painfully discovers that legitimate labour can only be obtained by illegitimate means. Silvio 'buys' his way into

a decent job in an industrial southern city, by betraying his friend. Patrician engineer Vitri arranges the post for him as a reward for Silvio's betrayal of his friend.

'El poeta parroquial', the chapter that was conveniently edited out from the first edition in 1926, is of particular importance for understanding Arlt's later work. This suggests why Ricardo Piglia decided to include it as an appendix in his 1993 edition. In this episode the main characters are a library secretary, an aspiring writer of prose who narrates the story, and a well-known poet. Arlt himself has been identified with the voice of the anonymous narrator who relates, in a most naïve manner, the discussion that takes place in the poet's study when he, invited by his friend, engages in an exchange of views, at first sight fictional, about Argentine attitudes to literature. This episode is particularly auto-biographical as it is about a young, inexperienced writer seeking the favour of an already established authority. There is also a rare reference to the first-person narrator's efforts to write; although this is hinted at in other chapters (in 'Los trabajos y los días' ['Works and Days'], it is Silvio's mother who mentions his writing). However, the references to his struggles as a writer are never in the first person. Here, in a you-are-what-you-read tone, the narrator introduces the reader to the contemporary literary scene: the poet in question had recently been featured in the satirical magazine *Caras y Caretas* and *El Hogar*. This episode is said to satirize real poet Félix Visillac. Omar Borré mentions that in this episode Arlt recalls the time when Conrado Nalé Roxlo and himself visited Visillac – note how Arlt would rub elbows with the more elitist stylists of Florida. Visillac, who was also editor of the magazine *La estrella de Flores* and would organise literary *tertulias* (evenings of poetry), is often remembered for being boring.⁶ It is not surprising, then, that this chapter was edited out of *El juguete*; it was perhaps too risky for Güiraldes to overlook such a blunt critique of

⁶ See Borré, *Roberto Arlt y la crítica (1926-1990)* (Buenos Aires: América Libre, 1996).

a living fellow writer. It would also have been ill-advised on the part of Arlt since he was himself a writer under patronage and aspiring to live on his writing.

At first sight, *El juguete rabioso* seems to consist of a confused mass of themes and an unsure literary experimentalism. Among the preferred topoi of recent commentators are the depiction of working-class life (social realism) and the oppression of vulnerable groups by exploitative, heartless bosses (political realism).⁷

Conversely, *El juguete rabioso* may also be read as a Bildungsroman or 'novel of formation'. First applied to Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1794-1796), the general term is used to describe a novel depicting the protagonist's growth, from childhood to adulthood. Nowadays, however, this category comprises different sub-genres. In all Bildungsroman, the process of maturation is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by an unbending social order. Education, both in the form of apprenticeship and experience, is of great importance for the social and intellectual growth of the protagonist. Very often, there is a search for identity, personal or social, marked by absence of the father figure and extreme poverty within an urban environment.

This genre has a long tradition in English literature. In Great Britain, it can trace its roots back to *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by Daniel Defoe. It was a genre especially

⁷ Roberto Arlt's oeuvre has inspired a considerable number of critical readings during the last four decades. Thus, most of his recurrent themes have already been tackled; from his relation to the avant-garde of the epoch to his brief communist phase, from his religious imagery to his approach to social and cultural values of the time. See Oscar Masotta, *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Capitulo, 1982); David Viñas, 'Arlt y los comunistas', *Contorno* (No2, May, 1954, p 8); *De Sarmiento a Cortázar: literatura y realidad política* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veinte, 1971); 'Arlt: Robar y salir corriendo', *El Periodista* (No 43, July, 1985, p unnumbered); Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1988); 'Arlt: ciudad real, ciudad imaginaria, ciudad reformada', *Punto de Vista*, (No 42, April, 1992, pp.15-21) and *La imaginación técnica* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1992) and Ana María Zubieta, *El discurso narrativo Arltiano. Intertextualidad, grotesco y utopía* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1987).

popular in Victorian England, where many authors produced works focused on the journey from childhood to adulthood, including (to name but four): Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*.⁸ In this sense, Güiraldes' *Don Segundo Sombra* could also be considered a Bildungsroman.⁹ It is worth noting that in a true Bildungsroman the journey the protagonist undergoes is generally upwards, the social ladder eventually leading him or her to a secured place within the middle or upper middle class of his/her particular epoch.

Although Silvio's social journey could be read as generically similar, it will result in no social or economic relief until earned by means of betrayal. In fact, we see no such social mobility towards a better life in *El juguete rabioso*. Quite the opposite, Silvio's teenage ritual of the move to manhood, with its failed aim of securing economic independence and finding his place in society, results in an 'anti-Bildungsroman' which depicts neither intellectual nor social growth but rather the fall from innocence of a boy who discovers only too soon that the aspirations of his social class are purely chimerical. With a consistent Darwinian pessimism, Silvio's attempts to find a way out of his predicament will always lead him to a darker and sadder corner of the city, a social cul-de-sac pushing him back, from whence he must start again, not refreshed but further humiliated and discouraged. For him, it is indeed a 'Vida puerca'

⁸ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974) p. 9. For a thorough discussion on the German Bildungsroman see also Michael Minden, *The German Bildungsroman: Incest and Inheritance* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁹ *Don Segundo Sombra* tells the story of a *gaucho* and his principles. The novel is often read as a Bildungsroman as the main character, Fabio (also the narrator), embarks on a journey of self-discovery. Central to the novel are the discovery of values such as courage, honour, loyalty and respect, which the protagonist learns during his years as disciple of the *gaucho* Don Segundo. Fabio establishes a father-son relationship with Don Segundo who turns his young apprentice from *resero* (i.e. a mere cowboy) into a cultured *estanciero* (i.e. rancher). See Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra* (San Antonio de Areco, Buenos Aires: Proa, 1926).

(Filthy Life); Silvio after all, is nothing but an alienated mad toy, the plaything of a despotic Buenos Aires. Though the protagonist will find his light at the end of the tunnel, he will have to buy his way out of the maze, perhaps paying a price which is too high.

In any event, whatever Silvio does to try and reverse his fate, it makes little impact – even when he follows the advice of people whose place is relatively secure. Let us consider, for example, the advice Silvio receives from his superior at the Military Aviation School: ‘Usted tiene que estudiar, estudiar mucho si quiere ser algo’.¹⁰ Ironically, this merely results in his dismissal.

Silvio, thus, is forever astray, uncomprehended. But Arlt himself also had (and at times still does) the reputation of an ‘out-law’ writer who clumsily managed to paint a naturalistic picture of suburban Buenos Aires of the late 1920s, whose novels are not well written, and lack poetic sensibility. This comes as no surprise, however, if we stop for a moment and consider that what Arlt is doing is telling the story seen from inside out. Arlt seems to be looking at society not from the pinnacle where his contemporary peers stood, but from the very bottom, from inside. He is part, perhaps as much as Silvio is, of that underworld of the illiterate, the impoverished, the deprived, the immigrant, the hopeless outsider who dreams of embarking on a journey a true Bildungsroman would chronicle. Not surprisingly, this results in a kind of literature that speaks to a different world, a literature constructed by a very particular subculture of petty criminals and social climbers; a literature constructed by means of appropriating other forms.

¹⁰ Arlt, 1985, p. 83.

Literature itself is central to Arlt's characters and their relationship with one another. Indeed, it will function both as a social marker and as a bonding agent with peers. In Jordan's words:

It seems clear that here is a novel which, whatever its shortcomings, is primarily a document which confronts and questions literature through parallels and parodies: it is the creation of a mind which was rejecting, or moving away from, something. What is of prime interest is not so much the story Arlt set out to tell – the fictional literary autobiography – but rather the question of where the writer had been before, what he was moving away from and towards.¹¹

Literature itself could be considered the *leitmotif* of Arlt's whole work. Even when he has been pigeonholed as oriented towards social concerns, most of his characters are victims of, and in a way denounce, social oppression, his work is a maze of intertextuality, a polyphony of voices gathered together regardless their origin or social/literary credibility or authority.

II. Heteroglossia

Having looked at the cultural background of the novel, let us now turn our attention to the theoretical construct put forward by Bakhtin and consider its application to Arlt's novel. Primarily, we will be looking at the application of the concept of heteroglossia, though it will also be necessary to discuss the notion of the Carnavalesque together with the related concepts of inversion, abjection and *ressentiment* (the latter deriving from Bernstein).

¹¹ Jordan, pp. 3-4.

In addressing the concept of anguish in *El juguete rabioso*, Jack Flint¹² comments that it is one that is ever present throughout Arlt's writing. Flint goes on to explain that the most likely justification for such a negative and unhappy view of life is that Arlt "[...] had come upon a ready model for this expression. That model was, in all probability, the Russian master, only recently 'discovered' by his contemporaries in Boedo –Dostoevsky."¹³

Interestingly, Dostoevsky's fiction was being explored at the same moment by Arlt's contemporary, Mikhail Bakhtin.

In his first book on Dostoevsky (translated into English as *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*)¹⁴ the Russian critic claims that Dostoevsky, because of his innovative way of organising the narrative, 'invented' the polyphonic novel, which is significantly different from the previous tradition. This ground-breaking innovation implies that the author/narrator would henceforth renounce the right of having the last word on matters and would be granted no more than equal authority with the utterances of the characters within his novel: "The chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels is a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices."¹⁵

Unlike in the novels of Tolstoy, for example, in Dostoevsky's work there is no vision beyond that of the character's range of perception, there is no finalising explanatory word as the voices of all, the narrator's and those of the various characters, engage in an unfinished, non-hierarchical dialogue. "On the one hand, then", as Simon Denith explains, "the polyphonic novel is to be distinguished from implicitly authoritarian forms of novelistic organization which retain the final word of the

¹² Jack M. Flint, *The Prose Works of Roberto Arlt* (University of Durham, 1985); also see Stasys Gostautas, 'Dostoevski en las novelas de Roberto Arlt' in *Nueva Narrativa Hispanoamericana*. III, (New York: Adelphi University, September 1973), pp. 131-144.

¹³ Flint, p. 19.

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (ed. and tran.) Carl Emerson, introduction by Wayne C. Booth (Manchester University Press, 1984).

¹⁵ Bakhtin, p. 6.

narrator.” Conversely, he continues “this is not to be seen as a simple abdication of responsibility – polyphony does not mean relativism [...] Rather, the dialogue of the polyphonic novel is authentic only in so far as it represents an engagement in which, in various ways, the discourses of self and other interpenetrate each other.”¹⁶

Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony will be used well beyond Dostoevsky’s novels as it addresses the fundamental question of narrative authority. At this point, we would probably agree that the questioning of authority, not only within the text but also beyond it, is an issue that will be particularly important for the reading and understanding of Arlt’s work. The issue raised by the use of the concept of polyphony not only has great significance for national (i.e. Argentine) critics but also for critics generally since it challenges the view that realistic novels are constructed by a hierarchy of discourses, the narrator’s voice standing out alone as representing the language of an unproblematic truth.

For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky is interested in provoking his characters into revealing themselves in extreme situations, rather than in explaining their action in socio-historical terms. Bakhtin’s is an aesthetic rather than a moral or ethical viewpoint, though it is one which has considerable implications for our understanding of the manner in which Dostoevsky relates character to plot.

Starting from the premise that human beings retain an irreducible moral status, consciousness cannot be conceived as existing in isolation. Just as language cannot happen amidst silence – utterances always occur between people – the individual consciousness is equally inter-subjective. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin explains that, “a single consciousness is a *contradictio in adjecto*.”¹⁷ This challenging notion implies that consciousness can only exist, at least *prima facie*, in a dialogue with another. In addition, this entails that Dostoevsky’s novels are populated by characters

¹⁶ Simon Denith, *Bakhtinian Thought, An Introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p 42.

¹⁷ Bakhtin, p. 288.

that only emerge in contact with each other. And just as we need two voices in order to enter into a conversation, two voices will be the minimum for existence within the novel.

In a monologic novel, by contrast, it is the narrator's voice that is in charge of reconciling the various differences amongst characters when necessary. In this respect, Bakhtin considers dialogic novels as being neither evolutionary nor progressive since no conflict or contradiction is ever resolved by the author's overreaching consciousness. How could it be otherwise in a world in which no voice is given priority?

Bakhtin produces his 'typologies' dividing novelistic prose into three broad categories, all depending on the orientation of the discourse used. Oversimplifying, he goes on to explain that the most important is the third category; that type of narration in which two or more voices can be heard. Here the narrator's voice like that of other characters appears in various mutual relations, though this relation depends on such matters as stylisation, hidden polemic and the elements of parody (amongst other possibilities). Perhaps the most exploited resource, he claims, is the parodic.

In the article 'Discourse and the Novel',¹⁸ published in the 1930s, Bakhtin claims that the novel is the heteroglot – double-voiced – *genre par excellence*. It is in the genre where both, intra and extra textual dialogue will occur. In Dostoevsky's novels, there is an inter-textual as well as an extra-textual discourse in which languages and lives struggle and compete. Bakhtin goes on to say that novels emerge as "a repetition of the very heteroglossia on which it draws."¹⁹ Consequently, a person is the bearer of a language with the specific set of social and ideological valuations that it entails. A clear distinction is here made, however, between the narrator's language and the author's intention.

¹⁸ *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (ed.) Michael Holquist, (tran.) Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 301-31.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, p. 303.

El juguete rabioso reflects both internal but particularly external heteroglossia in its treatment of the chaotic Buenos Aires of the 1930s.²⁰ Silvio's city is one rich in pesos, rich in culture, but particularly rich in immigrants and, therefore, in languages: Silvio receives his first education from an Andalusian cobbler and then from the ruffian horse-tender. Each of them contributes in a way to Silvio's literary education, the former, with thrilling tales of old-school outlaws; the latter, with anecdotes of the local criminal underworld and street-wisdom. It is significant that both are lame and speak vernacular Spanish. Social and ideological heteroglossia are represented in this case not only by the different trades Silvio's 'tutors' have – one an honest, hard-working cobbler, the other an equally hard-working, perhaps equally didactic, but less licit ruffian – but also by the type of Spanish they speak. Even when the cobbler speaks the same language, it is certainly a different type of Spanish when compared to the River Plate version. In any case, the cobbler is also an uneducated man who, although he enjoys reading reads only old, popular serial novels. The horse tender, on the other hand, talks the talk of the *arrabal* (literally, neighbourhood or city quarter, now particularly associated with districts of the city of Buenos Aires) and will provide Silvio with the argot shared by his lot.

Similarly, in *El juguete rabioso* different voices are anarchically juxtaposed in the same discourse where not only high and low culture are granted the same authority.

²⁰ *Lunfardo* is the argot that originated in prisons and other marginal areas in Buenos Aires at the late nineteenth, early twentieth century. It is characterised by the great amount of Italian words and expressions. Nowadays it is used to refer to Tango slang or simply to the popular River Plate Spanish spoken by people from Buenos Aires. As defined by Diego Abad de Santillán, *lunfardo* is the “jerga, lenguaje o modo de hablar propio del hampa porteña, del mundo del delito. En este vocabulario se mezclan voces de todos los idiomas, aunque predominan los de origen italiano.” (*Diccionario de argentinismos de ayer y de hoy*, Buenos Aires: Tipográfica Editora Argentina, 1976) p.384. At a simplistic level, the socio-semantics reflected in *El juguete rabioso*, echo the linguistic phenomena produced by the wave of, mainly Italian, immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Buenos Aires. Immigrant groups continued to use their original languages, only gradually adapting to the linguistic norms of their host. The sometimes too close relation to the Italian and the River Plate Spanish favoured the blurring of distinctions, particularly amongst less educated ones. It is in these marginal domains, where social and economic integration was hardest, where a particular kind of argot was constructed, heavily influenced by Italian. This *lunfardo*, was in turn, also ‘borrowed’ by other Argentine speakers, partially marginal groups such as students or writers, who adopted terms for purposes of their own (particularly useful, for example, in relation to drugs and sex).

but also foreign and peripheral voices – the Andalusian, the Italians and the *lunfardo* speakers – have an equally important say. Given that most of Arlt’s novels are overtly autobiographical, even when we can clearly identify the different voices, separating the author’s voice from that of the narrator becomes a difficult task. It is perhaps worth noting, that part of Arlt’s reputation as a ‘bad’ writer (known as for having problems with spelling and register) resides in the fact that he uses *lunfardo* alongside official, ‘proper’ Spanish. What is more, Arlt does not register this linguistic phenomena as something unusual or unconventional and only much later in subsequent editions of his novels do we occasionally have a ‘translation’ of his characters’ argot or a formal mark to warn the reader of such ‘improper’ usage: “No me gusta. Van a sospechar de nosotros [...]. Ya sabés, yo no le hago ascos a nada, pero no me gusta. Está demasiado cerca y la ‘yuta’ tiene olfato.”²¹

In the case of the particular edition we are using (the sixth edition of the collection Biblioteca Clásica y Contemporánea, Buenos Aires: Losada, 1985) the editor does include a footnote with the intra-lingual translation, ‘secret police’. Later on words like *bondi* (argot meaning ‘tram’ or ‘bus’) or *cana* (police agent) would be also footnoted.²² Yet, Roberto Arlt himself would not point out these changes of register, perhaps he would not have felt the need to do so as in his sociolect no such divisions would have been relevant or even noticeable. Another aspect of *Lunfardo* (in addition of the heavy Italian lexicalisation) is the use of rhyming verse; a type of playful slang, which consists on reversing syllables in short words. This is a distinctive word game played by *compadritos* (literally braggart, loud-mouth, though typically associated with *porteño* character and attributes, mainly being quick thinking, street wise and, perhaps paradoxically, well-mannered and gentlemanly):

²¹ Arlt, p. 22. “I don’t like it. They’re going to suspect us [...] You know I don’t turn up my nose up at anything, but I don’t like it. It’s too nearby, and the cops have a good sense of smell.” (Aynesworth, p. 35).

²² Arlt, p. 29.

¿La prensa? ... Y claro... me pongo los pantalones viejos, no se me rompa el
“jetra”...²³

Here, the word ‘*jetra*’ is also explained in a footnote in this edition. It means *traje*, suit, only written with the syllables in the reverse order. Significantly, Aynesworth, chooses to keep the playful tone mimicking the syllable inversion game in the word “suit” and footnotes it for the sake of making this choice meaningful for an English Speaking readership (“Putting on the pressure, huh?...Well, sure...just so long as I don’t rip my new ‘itsu’.”).²⁴ Equally, in ‘El idioma de los argentinos’ (The Language of the Argentines), included in a collection of his *Aguafuertes Porteñas*, Arlt ridicules mainstream writers and grammarians who would follow grammatical rules prescribed by Spanish academics to the letter, their writing resulting in a language devoid of all interest. In his view, the language of the Argentineans is one of anarchical syntax and vocabulary, enriched precisely by the exploitation of the different voices, particularly the *lunfardo* and the ‘gauchesque’. In this article, Arlt makes use of an analogy between grammar and boxing, claiming that if you follow the European style, it will teach you ‘punches’ that will result in a fight suitable for a visual spectacle. However, if the punches are thrown by an ‘a-grammatical’ local boy from any angle, he will certainly ‘punch the soul out’ of the other boxer under the very eyes of the European master who would not understand how or why such an eclectic technique proved so effective. Similarly, again according to Arlt, the people who like himself, are undergoing continuous changes, draw upon words from all angles, which might set the teeth of bourgeois writers on edge but none the less enriches the language. The example he gives is the use of a foreign term such as ‘sandwich’ instead of an affected and

²³ Arlt, p. 21.

²⁴ Aynesworth, p. 35.

pretentious Spanish equivalent (*bocadillo*), a term he considers would never be employed by these pompous intellectuals in the privacy of their homes.²⁵

Arlt's prose contains many different idiolects, though he leaves it up to the reader to spot the various linguistic 'irregularities', perhaps emulating the wider social setting of Buenos Aires where no formal indicators separate the many juxtaposing voices. But not only does Arlt jumble vernacular and mainstream voices without warning the reader; he also blends River Plate lexis with borrowings from the Italian domesticated for local use (a typical linguistic phenomenon of certain areas of metropolitan Buenos Aires called *cocoliche*) indiscriminately placing them alongside Hispanicism, something that widens the gap between his socio-cultural background and that 'other' world of the conventional. As Michele McKay Aynesworth explains in her notes to the 2002 translation of *El juguete rabioso*, this proves a feature so intrinsic in Arlt that aiming to keep loyal to the vernacular and deliberately hasty style Arlt was proud of having forged proved a very difficult task indeed.

Faithfulness to Arlt's language did not come easily, for he revelled in mixing Hispanicisms (*cerilla* rather than the Argentine word *fósforo* for "match"), Argentine idioms and slang, unorthodox diction and syntax, elevated poetic prose, foreign terms, technical scientific language, immigrant dialects, and serial romance archaisms. One explanation for this polyglot anarchy is the social environment in which Arlt grew up. The largely self-taught, working-class immigrants read whatever came to hand – cheap Spanish translations of Dostoyevsky and other European writers, popular science magazines, serial novels, and whatever books were available in the local public library.²⁶

It is precisely through these hybrid constructions that polyphony is achieved. Hybrid structures, according to Bakhtin, are those in which there is one single, spoken

²⁵ 'El idioma de los argentinos', in *Aguafuertes porteñas: Crónica de sí mismo seguido de El idioma de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Edicom, S.A. 1969), pp. 149-52.

²⁶ Aynesworth, p. 13.

grammatical, syntactical and compositional utterance that actually contains two styles. two ‘languages’, two semantic and axiological belief systems. There are no formal or compositional boundaries between the two voices, making two or more languages take place within the limits of a simple sentence. We learn that in order to achieve polyphony in a text playing with speech styles, languages and belief systems is essential. Diversity of speech is fundamental to achieve comic style, the novel is considered the major heteroglot genre, parody being the most extensively exploited resource. Literary parody serves to distance the author still further from language and complicate even more his relationship to the literary language of his time, especially in the novel’s territory. The novelistic discourse dominating an epoch is turned into an object and itself becomes a means for refracting new authorial intentions.

But how is that reflected in *El juguete rabioso*? Linguistically, this novel offers clear examples of a parodic, hybrid constructions acting in a heteroglot context, some of them we have already discussed earlier. Let us examine another one, the minutes taken in the meeting of the ‘Club of the Midnight Horsemen’:

Dicho diario se llevaba por turno, al final de cada acta era firmado, y cada rúbrica llevaba su sello correspondiente.

Allí podían leerse cosas como las que siguen:

Propuesta de Lucio. — Para robar en el futuro sin necesidad de ganzúa, es conveniente sacar en cera virgen los modelos de las llaves de todas las casas que se visiten.

Propuesta de Enrique. — También se hará un plano de la casa donde se saque prueba de llaves. Dichos planos se archivarán con los documentos secretos de la Orden y tendrán que mencionar todas las particularidades del edificio para mayor comodidad del que tenga que operar.

Acuerdo Genral de la Orden. — Se nombra dibujante y falsificador del Club al socio Enrique.

Propuesta de Silvio. — Para introducir nitroglicerina en un presidio, tómese un huevo, sáquese la clara y la yema y por medio de una jeringa

se le inyecta el explosivo. Si los ácidos de la nitroglicerina destruyen la cáscara del huevo, fabríquese con algodón pólvora una camiseta. Nadie sospechará que la inofensiva camiseta es una carga explosiva.

Propuesta de Enrique. —El club debe contar con una biblioteca de obras científicas para que sus cofrades puedan robar y matar de acuerdo a los más modernos procedimientos.²⁷

We have seen so far that heteroglossia is incarnated in individual figures within the boundaries of the novel, still,

[...] such oppositions of individual wills and minds are submerged in *social* heteroglossia, they are reconceptualized through it. Oppositions between individuals are only surface upheavals of the untamed elements of social heteroglossia, surface manifestations of those elements that play *on* such individual oppositions make them contradictory, saturate their discourses and discourses with a more fundamental speech diversity.²⁸

Thus, in Arlt's extract we find the detailed proceedings constituting the minutes for an illicit organization destined to burgle the houses of the neighbourhood. It might be argued that the main purpose is to achieve a humorous effect, playing with the formal style narrating the meticulous organization of a nonetheless illicit activity. Yet, this could be read as a double parody. On the one hand, linguistically, this could be interpreted as a 'mere' stylistic device to achieve humour. Clearly echoing the more formal register, the minutes are not only mocking the legal discourse of respectable

²⁷ Arlt, p. 20. "The Minutes were recorded each in turn, signed at the end of each session, and stamped at each heading. They contained items such as these: *Lucio's Proposal*. In order to rob in the future without needing a picklock, we should make wax imprints for the keys of all houses we visit. *Enrique's Proposal*: We'll also make a plan of the house when we copy the keys. Said plans will be filed with the secret documents of the Order and must mention all peculiarities of the building for greater ease of whoever must operate therein. *General Agreement of the Order*: Member Enrique is officially designated as the Club's draftsman and counterfeiter. *Silvio's proposal*: In order to blow up a fortified area, take an egg, remove the white and the yolk and inject the explosive using a syringe. If the eggshell is destroyed by the nitroglycerine acids, make a jacket out of cellulose nitrate. No one will suspect that an innocent jacket carries an explosive charge. *Enrique's Proposal*: The Club should have a library of scientific works so that the brotherhood may rob and kill according to modern, industrial methods." (Aynesworth, p. 33-34).

²⁸ Bakhtin, p. 53.

institutions of the time but also the bureaucratic exactitude of working men's political associations.

On the other hand, this also constitutes a backhanded tribute to Arlt/Silvio's role model Rocambole, Ponson du Terrail's bandit, whose popular adventures published in the nineteenth century would be considered not only a minor genre in themselves but also one capable of corrupting youths.²⁹ The Rocambole sequence, popular in French newspapers serials, encountered a number of readers in Spanish translations such as the *Colección intriga* in Argentina. Silvio's 'rocambolesque' gang chose a name that echoes du Terrail's *Los caballeros del claro de luna* (The Moonlight Horsemen). The tribute goes further as in order for their club to be complete they devised an 'official' cork stamp designed by skilful Enrique which represented "el emocionante espectáculo de un corazón perforado por tres puñales."³⁰ The stamp represents a clear homage to the hallmark Knave of Hearts, the renowned band of robbers in one of the Rocambole instalments:

GERTRUDE.

Vous ne savez donc pas ce que c'est que le valets de cœur?...

VALENTIN.

Faites excuse, je suis même très-fort au piquet et au bésigue...

GERTRUDE.

Mais je vous parle d'une bande de brigands qui est malheureusement trop connue....

VALENTIN.

Tiens, tiens...

GERTRUDE

Et il est prouvé que ces scélérats n'hésitent pas à tuer pour voler....

VALENTIN. Ah! c'est indigne! Mais pourquoi les appelle-t-on les valets de

²⁹ See Sylvia Saïtta, 'Traiciones desviadas, ensoñaciones imposibles; los usos del folletín en Roberto Arlt' in *Iberoamericana*, nr 74, (Hamburg, 1999), pp. 63-80.

³⁰ Arlt, p. 20. "[...] and the cork stamp designed by Enrique: its rectangular surface bore the thrilling image of a heart pierced by three daggers." (Aynesworth, 2002, p. 33).

cœur?

GERTRUDE.

Parce qu'ils ont l'habitude invariable de laisser parler la même trace de leur passage: dans les tiroirs des meubles qu'ils ont vidés, sur plaie de l'homme qu'ils ont assassiné, on trouve toujours une carte, un valet de cœur...³¹

As we can observe, Silvio's club might have been instituted for illicit purposes though it does so following the book; we see once again how both Arlt and Silvio inspire themselves by their reading habits. In this case, fictional hero Rocambole becomes the yardstick for Silvio and his gang's petty delinquency. Possibly, the clashing of voices here is between the canonical traditions denouncing the fact that non-mainstream, popular literature can only corrupt, a view which is ambiguously supported and ridiculed here. Indeed, the inherent satirical overtones here, which make explicit that proper form does not guarantee either a 'licit' ideology or an educative content, is based on a deliberate cultural confusion concerning the interpretation of the original text. But what Arlt is perhaps really playing tribute to here is not so much du Terrail's popular type of fiction, but the heroic bravura of Rocambole. It is the sociology of banditry what Arlt/Silvio is telling us about, an underworld only available to someone who, like Silvio, and perhaps like Arlt himself, is telling the story from the very bottom. As we observed before, the backdrop for *El juguete rabioso* is the subculture of petty criminals, crooks and hooligans. Silvio lives his life in an underworld governed by an inversion of the social values that rule the 'other' world. This also provides an unlikely dimension of *El juguete rabioso* considered as an 'inverted Bildungsroman'.

³¹ *Rocambole, Drame en cinq actes*, in *Sept Tableaux* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, Libraires Éditeurs, 1864). The English stage play of *Rocambole; or the Knaves of Hearts, and the Companions of Crime!* (as one version was called), was first performed in England at the Theatre Royal, Sadler's Wells, on the 4 March 1865, under the title of '*Bacarat*'. In it, Gertrude tells Venture about the Knaves of Heart, a band of robbers "Who it has been too well proved hesitate not to kill to obtain heir plunder" and named thus "Because, in the chest that they have emptied, and upon the wound of the man they have assassinated, there is invariably found a card, a knave of hearts—" (London: Thomas H. Lacy, Theatrical Publications, 1867). The play was certainly performed in Spanish, though the details of the production are unknown, but du Terrail's work was widely available in translation from the 1860s onwards.

As we saw earlier, we may read Silvio's passage or journey as a generic Bildungsroman, that is, the story of a young man who sets out to cast off his poverty and achieve something in life. Remarkably, Silvio's only way out seems to be the route of petty crime; hence, Silvio's fantasies of becoming a 'bandido de alta escuela' ("a bandit of the old school").³² But why would that road towards delinquency seem the only plausible option for a young man like Silvio?

III. Social Banditry

In *Bandits*, Eric Hobsbawm³³ provides an account of the underlying ideological issues behind the concept of social banditry. Banditry, he claims, "challenges the economic, social and political order by challenging those who hold or lay claim to power, law or the control of sources."³⁴ Consequently, banditry as a social phenomenon cannot exist outside a socio-economic and political order to be challenged. Traditional banditry typically originates over land power, in rural contexts but, as we shall see, urban banditry shares much common ground, especially with regard to resentment and a sense of collective group form bonding in defence against the power of outside authority and/or capital. Historically, Hobsbawm goes on to explain, "banditry as an expression of such collective resistance has been very common, [...] as a social phenomenon, is about class, wealth and power."³⁵

Thus, by definition, we learn that bandits oppose obedience, are outside the range of power relationships, are also likely to exercise power themselves, and because of that, they are potential rebels. The bandit 'etiquette' will, as described by

³² Arlt 1985, p. 10; Aynesworth, p. 24.

³³ Here Hobsbawm presents a study of social rebels and outlaws, including Indian, Spanish, Brazilian, Mexican, African and Asian mythical robber-rebels, who in the public eye are not criminals but heroes of one kind or another. Using a setting of ballads, legends and films, *Bandits* covers four hundred years of celebrated names such as Robin Hood, Pancho Villa, Jesse James, Giuseppe Musolino and Rob Roy just to name a few. (see Hobsbawm, 2000).

³⁴ Hobsbawm, p. 7.

³⁵ Hobsbawm, p. 20

Hobsbawm, vary depending on the historical epoch, and cultural or geographical position, but, in all cases, *banditi*, *bandoleros*, *haiduks*, *congraceiros*, *celali* or *shiftas* will hold a similar respected, social position within their own community. Throughout time, social bandits have been peasant outlaws whom lords and state regard as criminals “but who remain within peasant society and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported.”³⁶

The concept of social banditry provides a useful starting point for analysing the conduct of Silvio. More than wealth and well-being, it is a hunger for social acceptance that underlies his behaviour. He dreams of being admired, respected, socially worthy of a place in that ‘other’ world he is so far away from. Silvio’s first, perhaps only, sign of recognition and favourable peer judgment comes at the very beginning of the book:

Ché, ¿no conocés a Silvio? Éste es el del cañón. Sonada aventura fue la de mi cañón y grato me es recordarla. [...] Admirados lo examinaron los muchachos de la vecindad, y ello les evidenció mi superioridad intelectual, que desde entonces prevaleció en las expediciones organizadas para ir a robar fruta o descubrir tesoros en los despoblados.³⁷

And later on:

Así conversábamos en torno a la mesa del café, sombríos y gozosos de nuestra impunidad ante la gente, ante la gente que no sabía que éramos ladrones, y un espanto delicioso nos apretaba el corazón al pensar con qué ojos nos mirarían

³⁶ Hobsbawm, p. 22.

³⁷ Arlt, p. 11-12. “A resounding adventure was that of my cannon, and happy am I to recall it” [...] “The neighbourhood boys examine it with astonishment and saw it as a sign of my intellectual superiority. After that, on our expeditions to steal fruit or seek buried treasures in the no-man-land- [...] I was in charge.” (Aynesworth, p. 25-26).

las doncellas que pasaban, si supieran que nosotros, tan atilados jóvenes, éramos ladrones... ¡Ladrones!³⁸

We can see that within Silvio's world, being a citizen worthy of respect does not depend on having a licit profession. Quite the opposite, his male peers look up to old school criminals as those characters have been brave enough to defy the law and live with impunity, imperceptibly mingling with other shady 'gentlemen'. Women, on the other hand, consider such bandits dignified 'champions of social justice'. courageous, their criminal behaviour enhancing their masculinity.

Traditionally, Hobsbawm suggests, this primitive form of rebellion and crime is set against a backdrop of social transformation. As individuals, these rebels are not so much political or social, let alone revolutionaries, but mainly peasants who refuse to submit, thus standing out from their fellow citizens. They are excluded from their functional society therefore forced into outlaw. "Banditry itself is therefore not a programme for peasant society but a form of self-help to escape it in particular circumstances."³⁹ Social bandits are, almost by definition, outsiders, "who form their own separate society, if not actually an anti-society of the 'bent' which mirrors that of the 'straight'. They normally speak their own special language (argot, cant, *caló*, *Rotwelsch*)."⁴⁰

Reading *El juguete rabioso*, it becomes clear that the code Silvio shares with his fellow bandits, as well as his social peers, differs significantly from the language of the 'others', heteroglossia reflecting both different registers and social/cultural worlds.

³⁸ Arlt, p 23. "This was the drift of conversation as we sat around the table, solemnly enjoying impunity before others, before people who didn't know we were thieves; and a delicious horror clutched our hearts as we thought of how those new girls who were passing by would look at us if they knew that we, so young and so carefully, turned out, were thieves... Thieves!" (Aynesworth, p. 36).

³⁹ Hobsbawm, p. 29.

⁴⁰ Hobsbawm, p. 43.

Until this point, Silvio has embraced many of the features common to noble robbers.⁴¹

However, Silvio's case needs to be distinguished in other respects.

The 'noble robbers' described by Hobsbawm inaugurate their careers of outlaws in response to injustice. They are victims who have either been robbed of either their honour or 'good name' or persecuted by the authorities for a crime they did not commit. Whatever forced out of society, they would still be seen as 'righters of wrongs', who take from the rich to give to the poor. On the other hand, firstly, Silvio's petty criminal career is launched within a different context; he is an urban outcast, not a peasant. Secondly, Silvio is not the same kind of victim. Although nobody has taken his land away he still has been robbed of something; his dignity, the dignity of being able to provide a livelihood for himself, to be self-sufficient and earn his living as a honourable citizen. Likewise, though it is true that Silvio will rob the rich to give to the poor, in his case, some of these actions seem gratuitous, a means of 'getting even' with a society that denies him access. This means of getting even with society, the anarchic administration of 'social justice' at their own hands, is depicted in various different ways. At times, pretending to be potential tenants, Silvio and his gang physically loot empty houses that are to let, turning into cash everything they can take with them after visiting the property to let: "Aún no he olvidado la alegría que experimentaba al abrir las puertas. Entrábamos violentamente, ávidos de botín recorriamos las habitaciones tasando de rápidas miradas la calidad de lo robable."⁴² Indeed, the gang exercises their

⁴¹ In chapter IV, Hobsbawm outlines the 'image' of the Noble Robber summarizing it thus: The noble robber begins his career not by crime but as a victim of injustice; he 'rights wrongs': "takes from the rich to give to the poor"; "never kills but in self-defence or just revenge"; "returns to his people as an honourable citizen and a member of the community"; "he is admired, helped and supported by his people"; if he dies this is invariably only through treason "since no decent member of the community would help the authorities against him"; at least in theory noble robbers are invisible and invulnerable: he is no enemy of the king or emperor but only of the local gentry, clergy or other oppressor (Hobsbawm, pp. 47-8). The argument being advanced here is that even though most of these criteria apply to Arlt's hero(s), Silvio's case poses a peculiar problem since although his figure is generically similar to Hobsbawm's social bandits, Silvio does not, except temporarily, represent the 'noble robber' worthy of social admiration.

⁴² Arlt, p 16.

‘gift’, “esta limpia habilidad”;⁴³ ironically, this also constitutes their first ‘organised’, ‘systematic’ job as a team. Illicit as their careers as outlaws may be, they are proud of their team-work; after all, the ‘Club of the Midnight Horsemen’ was particularly devised as a means of institutionalising their profession:

No recuerdo por medio de qué sutilezas y sinrazones llegamos a convencernos de que robar era acción meritoria y bella... resolvimos organizar un club de ladrones, del que por el momento nosotros solos éramos afiliados.⁴⁴

Thus, their new profession restores their confidence; they become, at last, good at something which, although unlawful, exults and excites them, empowers them:

Así vivíamos días de sin par emoción, gozando el dinero de los latrocinios, aquel dinero que tenía para nosotros un valor especial y hasta parecía hablarnos con expresivo lenguaje.

[...] Sí, el dinero adquirido a fuerza de trapacerías se nos fingía mucho más valioso y sutil [...] No era dinero que se abomina porque hay que ganarlo con trabajos penosos, sino dinero agilísimo [...].

[...] osaría decir que nos nimbaba la frente un halo de soberbia y audacia. Soberbia de saber que al conocerse nuestras acciones hubiéramos sido conducidos ante un juez de instrucción.⁴⁵

Silvio, however, not only appropriates material goods, he also appropriates cultural goods. We know Silvio reads indiscriminately, from practical manuals and cheap newspaper serials to ‘proper’ literature. What is more, he seems to know and enjoy his high-brow reading, even if this marks a transgressive crossing of boundaries into a socially bound world to which he should be denied access. Thus, his social role

⁴³ Arlt, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Arlt, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Arlt, p. 22. “And so we lived those days of rare excitement, enjoying the fruits of our thievery. That money was special, and spoke to us in a private language. [...] It’s a fact, the money we acquired through trickery seemed more subtle and rare, the highest form of wealth. [...] It was not that vile, hateful money that must be earned by hard work but rather easy money [...] and I dare say a halo of pride and courage adorned our brows. We basked in the knowledge that, had our deeds been known, we would have been hauled before a judge.” (Aynesworth 2002, pp. 35-6).

becomes blurred: he seems to take joy in stepping into a socially superior world at the same time as devising ingenious plans to deceive it. The pretence at respectability, involving as it does role-playing and hoax, underlying their schemes is ambiguous: “Donde un cartel anunciaba una propiedad en alquiler, nos dirigíamos a solicitores referencias; compuestos los modales y compungido el rostro. Parecíamos los monaguillos de Caco.”⁴⁶ At other times, Silvio delights in pacifically invading the world of the rich, a world of those who are blessed with the financial means of achieving education and culture. Perhaps as proud as he is of being street-wise, a ‘respectable’ crook, Silvio’s main goal is to steal the ‘fire of knowledge’, unattainable for those in his position.

It comes as no surprise, then, that within the wider literary context of his time, Arlt’s work seems displaced, his language marginal and outside the dominant literary discourse.⁴⁷ Yet, Arlt also draws sustenance from canonical writers such as Cervantes as well as from popular and marginal culture, while parodying both. Arlt’s hybrids mix accents and erase boundaries between authorial voice and the speech of his various characters, while incorporating different genres, the ensemble constituting the very essence of heteroglossia. In this sense, Arlt’s work also becomes a form of inter-

⁴⁶ Arlt, p. 16.

⁴⁷ There have been numerous critical studies aimed at understanding Arlt’s innovative style. In *Nueva historia de la novela hispanoamericana* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1986, p. 173-4) Fernando Alegría explains that different Argentine literary histories have failed to pin Arlt into either the old Argentine literary tradition or the new, avant-garde vanguard. Beatriz Sarlo, on the other hand, has read Arlt’s “foreignness” in the context of mass immigration and Argentina’s incorporation into the global economy, a phenomenon that produced a radical modernization of cultural styles in the Buenos Aires of the 1920s and 1930s. Domingo-Luis Hernández, on the other hand, in *Roberto Arlt: la sombra pronunciada* (Barcelona: Montecinos, 1995), interpreted Arlt’s representation of modernity as “errant, asymmetrical, mediated and multi-faceted, alienating” linking him with contemporary and foreign novelists such as Anthony Burgess, Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke and Antonio Tabucchi. Likewise, in ‘Roberto Arlt and Anarchist Modernism’ Glen S. Close calls for reading Arlt as “a writer who needs to be read not only alongside Onetti, Cortázar, Viñas, etc. [...] Also as a practitioner of the modern conspiracy novel perhaps founded by Dostoevsky.” (paper delivered at the 1998 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, The Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, Illinois, September 24-26, 1998 p. 10).

language, a cultural translation, as we witness an appropriation of culture. an intertextual rewriting, that results in the creation of new meanings.

Curiously enough, it is not until Bakhtin prepared his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* for publication, a book which seems to have been completed as early as 1922 but which he revised in 1963, that Cervantes and *Don Quixote* appear as prototypes for the distinctive novelistic formation of 'polyphony' which Dostoevsky is credited with originating. Bakhtin allows that "embryonic rudiments" or "early buddings of polyphony" can be detected in Cervantes, as well as in Shakespeare, Rabelais and Grimmelshausen.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in material added to the 1963 edition, Cervantes' polyphonic potential is granted further attention under the rubric of 'carnival' (a subject we shall discuss later). In *Don Quixote*, Bakhtin explains, the author's particular double-voiced discourse expresses authorial intentions but in a refracted manner. Once incorporated in the novel, heteroglossia serves two speakers and two intentions simultaneously.

In this respect, *El juguete rabioso* bears a twofold intra-textual relation with Cervantes' *Quixote*. On the one hand, Arlt's text can be seen as an example of stylistic parody since it is a novel of many voices, governed by an internally dialogised discourse in the tradition of the *Quixote*. Arlt's Silvio Astier, in the same fashion as Cervantes' Don Quixote, sets the standards not only of good and bad, dignified and undignified conduct, high and low comedy, but also, through the selection of fictional role models which will be enacted in real life, blurs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Both Silvio and Don Quixote are caught up in a world not of real men but of imaginary idols they aspire to emulate, perhaps as real and alive in their minds as any other human being.

⁴⁸ Bakhtin, p. 33.

Yo había leído los cuarenta y tantos tomos que el vizconde Ponson du Terrail escribiera acerca del hijo adoptivo de mamá Fipart, el admirable Rocambole, y aspiraba a ser un bandido de alta escuela.⁴⁹

And later on in the third chapter, before the inquisitive eyes of the three officers interviewing him at the Military School of Aviation, Silvio boosts his confidence and his posture by projecting the image of his idol Rocambole:

[...] Y en aquel instante, antes de hablar, pensé en los héroes de mis aventuras predilectas y la catadura de Rocambole, del Rocambole con gorra y visera de hule y sonrisa canalla en la boca torcida, pasó antes mis ojos incitándome al desparpajo y a la actitud heroica.

Confortado, segurísimo de no incurrir en errores, dije...⁵⁰.

On the other hand, *El juguete rabioso* articulates, denounces even, one of the cultural anxieties of the time: the fact that reading junk literature is often perceived in itself as a first step towards a life of delinquency. Reading popular fiction is a means of distancing oneself from the socially approved norm, it pollutes the mind, and, in the worst of all cases, such as that of Don Quixote, is even capable of inducing madness.

A ver... amigo Astier, escriba lo que se le ocurra en este momento.

Vacilé; después anoté con un precioso lapicero de oro que deferente el hombre me entregó:

“La cal hierve cuando la mojan”.

— ¿Medio anarquista, eh? Cuide su cerebro, amiguito... cuídelo, que entre los 20 y 22 años va a sufrir un *surmenage*. Como ignoraba, pregunté:

—¿Qué quiere decir *surmenage*?⁵¹

⁴⁹ Arlt, p. 50. “I had already read the forty-some-odd volumes written by Viscount Ponson du Terrail about the admirable Rocambole, adopted son of Mother Fipart, and I dreamed of becoming a bandit of the old school.” (Aynesworth, p. 24).

⁵⁰ Arlt, p. 77. “In the instant before speaking, I thought of the heroes in my favourite books—especially Rocambole who, wearing a his visoured cap and twisted smile on his rouge’s mouth appeared before my eyes, spurring me on to glib speech and a heroic pose. Comforted, and confident that I could not possibly go wrong, I said...” (Aynesworth, p. 91).

⁵¹ Arlt, p. 58. “...Astier, my friend, write down what occurs to you at the moment’ I hesitated: then using an expensive gold pen he handed me with a deferential air, I wrote: ‘Lime boils when you put

At the same time, picking and choosing his reading from a multiethnic range of texts in a city whose customs and people are as diverse as its reading options, consuming peripheral literature will prove pivotal for the protagonist's construction of his own identity.

Perhaps the first step towards Silvio's peculiar formation is described at the very beginning of the novel:

Cobróme simpatía a pesar de ser un cascarrabias y por algunos cinco centavos de interés me alquilaba sus libracos adquiridos en largas suscripciones. Así, entregándome la historia de la vida de Diego Corrientes, decía:

— Ezte chaval, hijo... ¡qué chaval!...era ma lindo que una rozza y lo mataron lo miguelete....⁵².

Later on in the novel, Silvio will, once more, be taken for an anarchist based on his taste in reading material and will prove that as a consumer of cultural goods, he is nothing if not eclectic. When interviewed at the Military School of Aviation he finds the chance to boast about his library and his reading of Baudelaire, Dostoevsky and Baroja, three canonical authors, the reading of which will position him above the Florida-Boedo dichotomy discussed in the introduction. Furthermore, although proud to have avidly consumed the work of more popular names, Silvio is still somewhat reluctant to admit in public he admires serial novels written by authors such as Ponson du Terrail:

water on it.' 'Bit of an anarchist, eh? Watch out your brain, little friend... Take care, because you're going to have a *surmenage* when you're between twenty and twenty-two years old.' Since I didn't know what he was talking about, I asked. 'What's a *surmenage*?' It's a temporary fit of madness'''. (Aynesworth, p. 72).

⁵² Arlt, p. 8. "The old buzzard took a liking to me, and for some five centavos would let me borrow the cheap serial novels he had acquired via lengthy subscriptions. Handing me the story of Diego Corrientes, he would comment in his thick Andalusian accent: 'Thiz kid... Whadda kid!... Sweeter'n a roze, and the mountain guards, they got`him...'" (Aynesworth, p. 22).

Además, tengo una biblioteca regular, y si no estudio mecánica estudio literatura. — ¿Cómo –interrumpió el capitán–, también literatura?
 —Sí señor y tengo los mejores autores: Baudelaire, Dostoievsky, Baroja.
 —Che, ¿no será un anarquista, éste?
 — No señor capitán. No soy un anarquista. Pero me gusta estudiar, leer.⁵³

Ironically, although Silvio had proved to his interviewing panel that he has a considerable knowledge of mechanics and chemistry, particularly “Cinemática... Dinámica ... motores a vapor y explosión [...] También he estudiado química y explosivos, que es una cosa interesante”⁵⁴ his tone is almost apologetic when he explains that he also reads for pleasure. But why would someone have to apologise for one’s literary taste? Here there seems to be more than the mere implication of a politically oriented ‘unsafe’ reading. Above and beyond the fact that certain choices clearly suggest political allegiances, reading for pleasure is considered a waste of time amongst Silvio’s working-class peers who cannot afford to take time off work and indulge themselves in the company of a book. Time, particularly leisure time, is a commodity while the study of ‘proper’ books constitutes gratuitous luxury, an activity, with its patrician resonances, lacking any practical value.

In *Culture and Anarchy* Matthew Arnold proposes that ‘culture’, education in a traditional sense,⁵⁵ functions as a guide for the aristocracy and the middle-class but, significantly, it must be structured and managed in order to bring the working class to

⁵³ Arlt, p. 79. “[...] Besides, I have a fair-sized library, and if I’m not studying mechanics, I’m studying literature” “What,” interrupted the captain, ‘literature, too?’ ‘Yes, Señor, ad I have the best authors: Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky, Pío Baroja.” “Say, this guy wouldn’t be an anarchist, would he?’. ‘No, Captain. I’m not an anarchist. But I like to study, to read.” (Aynesworth 2002:93).

⁵⁴ Arlt, Ibid.

⁵⁵ In his *Culture and Anarchy*, (ed) J.D.Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932) Arnold uses the term “anarchy” as synonymous with popular culture which in turn serves to describe the disruptive nature of working class lived culture and the dangers concomitant with the working class entering the English political scene in 1867. Education, on the other hand, in the Arnoldian sense used as synonymous with culture, in this scenario, will be crucial for protecting the Barbarians (aristocracy) and the Philistines (middle class) from the Populace, ‘the raw and uncultivated masses’ as it is aimed to ‘civilise’ them. Perhaps it is worth noticing that in this sense, ‘education’ is the ticket for the protagonist of the Bildungsroman as, only after he has been washed out of his ‘populace’ manners, customs and beliefs will he become successfully integrated into that upper society.

order. Thus, the ultimate purpose of education is to restore the sense of subordination and deference to class, mainly, by attempting to remove the temptations to any kind of political agitations. Arnold suggests that to tackle the ‘anarchy’ of culture a mixture of culture and coercion is needed. This is achieved by a cultured State whose function will be to control and curtail the social, economic and cultural aspirations of the working class until the middle class is sufficiently cultured to take on this function itself. Put it in a nutshell, education, but only if tailored by the State, is the road to ‘culture’.

Indeed, Silvio and his peers would only be, if ever, passive subjects of a canonical moral order. Their access to ‘culture’ is blocked, or better still, dosed in quantity and quality by the system aiming to integrate them, to tame them to fit into it. Notice how Silvio will have to pay to step into his first ‘literature’, his appropriation of ‘dubious’ cultural capital also being illegitimate.⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, Silvio is taken for an anarchist on more than one occasion based not only on account of his pyromaniac declarations but also, and perhaps mainly, because of his reading choices.

In fact, Silvio’s contact with ‘culture’ is always closer to the illicit end of the spectrum. Firstly, his models cover a range of authors from canonical to ‘anarchic’, from practical to religious, display no systematic attachment, and certainly no attachment to ‘monitored’ reading. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, he is a self-taught young man, not following the traditional channels of education but appropriating as much knowledge as he manages to grab on his way, reading indiscriminately and learning equally from educative manuals, popular, instalment novels or mainstream, literary works. Significantly, one of the most challenging ‘jobs’ Silvio’s gang carries out is the looting of a school library, “tratábamos nada menos que

⁵⁶ The question of the illegitimate access to literature is also discussed in Chapter 6 in relation to Arlt’s detective fiction production. See also ‘Literatura y propiedad en la obra de Roberto Arlt’, in *La Opinión* (Buenos Aires, 10 April 1973) pp. 10-11.

de despojar la biblioteca de una escuela.”⁵⁷ This reinforces the idea that Silvio’s access to cultural capital is not only unlawful but also illegitimate.

Sacando los volúmenes los hojeábamos, y Enrique que era algo sabedor de precios decía:

—“No vale nada”, o “vale”.

— Las Montañas del Oro.

— Es un libro agotado. Diez pesos te lo dan en cualquier parte.⁵⁸

Crucially, it is worth pointing out that here cultural and economic value are juxtaposed: the volume Enrique describes as ‘*agotado*’ (meaning both ‘out of print’ and ‘sold out’) is, ironically, an early work of Leopoldo Lugones (1847-1938). Lugones’ *The Mountains of Gold* (1897) was written in a modernist style. This is one of the authors that represent the establishment for the generation of Borges; it is precisely the type of literary tradition Arlt would rebel against. In addition, Lugones was the first chairman of the S.A.D.E. (Sociedad Argentina de Autores, i.e. the Argentine Society of Authors), an organization Arlt satirised, describing it as a “museum artefact” in one of his ‘sketchings’, ‘Sociedad literaria: artículo de museo.’⁵⁹

When it comes to reading, Silvio does not discriminate. He is a ‘conscious misfit.’ And it is this sense of being a misfit which determines his relationship with each of the other characters.

⁵⁷ Arlt, p. 23.

⁵⁸ Arlt, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Arlt, *El Mundo*, 13 December 1918.

CHAPTER 3

The Abject Hero

I.

In Chapter 2 we proposed a Bakhtinian reading of *El juguete rabioso*. In the present chapter, we shall complement that reading by discussing another aspect; that is, the notions of Abjection and *ressentiment* as defined by Michael André Bernstein.¹

In the previous chapter, we observed that, inexorably, the anti-hero of Arlt's novel seems to be constantly resentful, miserable, and angry at a system that cuts people like him off any chance of social progression. Silvio is equally angry with everyone: the middle classes who do not need to work as hard as he does (especially considering his subsistence-level wage); at his fellow immigrants who turn their backs on their fellow countrymen; perhaps even at a God, whom everybody calls merciful, but is clearly incapable of ending such misery and injustice.

In fact, Silvio constitutes a perfect example of what Michael A. Bernstein calls the Abject Hero. Bernstein claims that the figure of the Abject Hero can be traced back to the Saturnalian dialogues. Starting by defining the role of the "allowed fool" in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, a member of a "commonly recognized guild"² at the time, Bernstein explains that the very condition of the clown's tolerated licence may amuse or bore but this did not extend to hurt: the social position of the fool's patrons and his peers could not be undermined by the antics of a mere jester. This archetypal role of the 'malcontent' clown, who would always have an embittered jibe on his lips, would be the

¹ Bernstein, Michael André, *Bitter Carnival. Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).

² Bernstein, p. 7.

central vehicle of satiric negation in Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*, the work Bernstein considers to depict the first Abject Hero in its fullest and most developed form.

Bernstein wonders whether the satiric negation of these 'licensed fools' could not constitute a new kind of Saturnalian irony. With the growing awareness of the questioner (the fool) of his own immersion in behaviour and a value system he finds ridiculous, a new dimension of painful self-consciousness must surely arise. This, in turn, must radically transform the entire nature of the character's relationship with society.

For us to understand here what position the literary figure of the Abject Hero occupies in Arlt's work, which will later on help us understand Arlt's *ressentiment*, we must revisit Bernstein's detailed analysis of classical topoi and theories of the Saturnalian dialogue to see how a particular literary mode "and its attendant philosophical and rhetorical vision slowly unfolded, following a logic that is partially formal and internal to the genre and partially a response to new historical conditions and crises."³

The fundamental structure of the Saturnalian dialogue is thus: whether it is a master and slave, monarch and fool, or philosopher and madman, this is a dialogue where two opposite characters will undermine our trust in the existence of stable identities and fixed character traits. Even if the main roles could change according to the social and historical conventions of the time, the central configuration remains the same: there is a movement of absolute reversal.

It is here that Bakhtin's conception of the Carnavalesque proves pivotal for explaining popular behaviours, which eventually become cultural codes that transpose into literature.⁴ This inversion of roles in the Saturnalian dialogues derives from Bakhtin's concept of Carnival. Carnival is characterised by the collapse of hierarchical

³ Bernstein, p. 9.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, (tran.) Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968).

differences. Carnival laughter becomes both the vehicle and the form of popular liberation. Historically, this is the period corresponding to the weeks preceding Lent in the calendar of modern Europe and is commonly associated with the popular, festive life of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. This historical institution and its related popular, festive code became the key for unlocking a crucial, recurrent theme in European cultural, social and historical artefacts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In this epoch we may observe a flowering of gay, affirmative and militantly anti-authoritarian attitude to life, founded upon what has been termed ‘grotesque realism’; namely the popular attitude of joyfully accepting and rejoicing in the ‘materiality of the body’.

Denith Simons describes how the notion of ‘grotesque realism’, particularly applied to the writing of Rabelais, links this popular festive life to literary and cultural practices. In *Gargantua, Pantagruel* (1532-51), Rabelais articulates an aesthetic that celebrates the archaic, body-based grotesque elements of popular culture and seeks to mobilise its participants against the humourless, seriousness of official culture. According to Bernstein, this ‘grotesque realism’ is based on the celebration of the material and the bodily, a celebration exulting eating, drinking, copulating, defecating – all governed by the principle of ‘degradation’, all of which constitutes a cultural and literary convention of the epoch. In short, ‘grotesque realism’ constitutes a cultural attitude to popular culture.⁵

The essential principle of ‘grotesque realism’ can be traced back to the ‘feast of fools’, a practice in which people prepared for the celebration of Carnival and the perpetuation of the material, bodily continuity of human life. The key attitude is degradation, but not purely as a negative process. Degradation can and does reflect the idea of the ambivalence of Carnival imagery. What Carnival writing does is to remind

⁵ Simon Denith, *Bakhtinian Thought, An introductory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). pp 42-43.

people that, as creatures, both food and faeces are part of us, thus degradation becomes an affirmation as it is linked to a process of regeneration and ultimate renewal. This is achieved by an exaggeration of all bodily parts and functions that are involved in the eating, defecating and reproductive functions.

The 'gay relativity' that is also crucial for the Carnival attitude consists of a celebration of what is incomplete, an attitude by means of which all the official certainties are belittled, inverted and parodied. In Carnival life, the high, the official, the sacred are all degraded and debased, while the popular is renewed and regenerated. For Bakhtin and his successors, the festive licence of the Saturnalia consists of the embodiment of an utopian existence, or rather the longing for an utopian world free from cast and cant, a world where all live and participate, equally; a world where hierarchical distinctions are obsolete. In Bakhtin's own words: "Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators [...] Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it and everybody is a participant."⁶

In Rabelais' work, Bakhtin finds a fully realised tradition based on the description of the carnivalesque, characterised by a melancholic undertone, largely framed in a *post festum* recollection. Rabelais' Carnival laughter is a rich, textured local insight; it is haunted by nostalgia as it is about the longing for a realm that would maintain that lack of hierarchical distinction and make it universal, transcending the duration of the popular festival. What Bernstein argues is that 'belatedness' (which he defines as the "knowledge of becoming after the festival")⁷ is not restricted to a post-Renaissance bourgeois culture, as Bakhtin claims, but is *the* particular condition of the Saturnalian text. In this sense.

⁶ See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 1968, p 5.

⁷ Bernstein, p. 187. Bernstein points out that the critical term 'belatedness' can be aligned with Harold Bloom's theory of poetic inheritance. Despite the fact that Bernstein himself has discussed his disagreement with Bloom's poetic Oedipology in other writings – "I think his [Bloom's] conceptions fail to account for many kinds of relationships that have existed between major poets and its predecessors" – the concept of 'belatedness' does become useful when helping define how the Abject Hero "views his position vis-à-vis the 'wise fools' of the satiric tradition."

what changes “throughout history is not the inclusiveness of the carnival per se but the literary consequences...”⁸

Thus, Bernstein sets out to trace the historical ancestors of the Abject Hero, a figure that, although essentially modern (making its first appearance in Diderot’s *Le Neveu de Rameau*), evolves from the specific genre of the Saturnalian dialogues. Therefore, in order to understand the figure of the Abject Hero, it is fundamental to go back to both Saturnalian dialogues and the concept of Carnival. It is recognised that neither Saturnalian dialogues nor Carnival privileges abjection, quite the opposite. None the less:

since it is as the antithesis of the Saturnalia’s optimistic and celebratory assumptions that the Abject Hero emerges, understanding the figure requires a vision of the tradition within which he arose and whose destructive aspects he continues to incarnate, no matter how the convention’s frontiers and surface characteristics have changed in succeeding eras.⁹

Bernstein goes on to observe that, in revisiting the confrontation of the Saturnalian dialogues, it is essential that one does so by attributing to it a historical specificity. In this respect, there are various questions to take into account. Firstly, one would need to consider how the various roles, monarch/fool, master/slave, etc, are defined in the epoch we are looking at. Specifically, are these determined, exclusively, as analogous to their social role; in a Foucauldian sense, would the ‘truth’ of each character’s discourse be determined by their role?¹⁰ Or else, is there a moral or

⁸ Bernstein, p. 17.

⁹ Bernstein, p. 18.

¹⁰ In *Power/Knowledge* ((ed) Colin Garden, New York: Pantheon, 1980) post-structuralist Michel Foucault uses his “geological” analysis to explore the relationship between power and knowledge and how this relationship operates in what he calls discourse formations, the conceptual frameworks which allow some modes of thought and deny others. Foucault believes that discourse is the means by which institutions wield their power through a process of definition and exclusion, legitimising certain discourses and excluding others. Taking further Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea that knowledge works as a weapon of power, Foucault aims to describe how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth. Power operates through discourse and discourse is rooted in power, thus power produces knowledge. Truth, in his view,

psychological dimension added to it? Bernstein points out that in Roman literature, for example, there seems to be no assumption that a master need be wiser or better than the slave. The intrinsic difference would reside in the fact that the master 'owns' the slave. Thus, although this carries no implication as regards the quality of the man himself, the difference in power and personal autonomy becomes decisive in determining whose discourse will be taken as the norm. Accordingly, "a monarch is conventionally presumed to possess an entire range of attributes in addition to his politico-legal authority, such as wisdom, a knowledge of statecraft, a devotion to principles of order, a sense of justice, etc., all of which the licensed fool presumably lacks." Thus, exclusively conventional expectations are pivotal in determining "both the points of contention between the speakers and the thrust of dialogue's irony", ¹¹ all of which implies that in order to invert the roles, the fool/slave will not only have to undermine the social and economic rank of his opponent but also his intellectual pretensions, or rather the social conventions by means of which the social hierarchy is configured.

Secondly, it is important to ask: "how much familiarity about the generic roles of his antagonist can the author assume as a kind of literary/cultural *donnée* already known to his reader, and to what extent must these expectations be explicitly thematised in the work itself?"¹² This is important as the author needs to determine to what extent the operative norms and conventions are recognised, to what extent they are part of the readers' shared background, a competence built by the education of consumers of the genre, which will in turn constitute the base for a readership's identification of them. Bernstein explains that this becomes crucial for the audience since there is a risk that the reader will not recognise the point at which the narration moves away from the model:

cannot be universal and timeless, as it will be constructed and negotiated against particular socio-historical conditions.

¹¹ Bernstein, p. 18.

¹² Bernstein, p. 19.

This issue becomes particularly acute in works like Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* or Céline's World War III trilogy, novels that depend heavily on the battle of wills and wits between a *ressentiment*-driven Abject Hero and his supposed betters. But in these books the contest has taken so violent and exacerbated a form that there is a risk the reader will fail to identify the convention at all, and thus see the works as deficient in coherence and structure.¹³

Thirdly, it is also essential to determine how self-conscious the characters are about their roles and the degree of naturalness or uneasiness with which they dwell on the conventional requirements of their parts. This may be seen as analogous to the internal dimension of the audience's recognition of the topos. "Indeed, the two kinds of knowledge, one strictly internal to the text as part of the characters' consciousness and one external as part of the reader's competence, may be set against one another by the author in order to complicate the effects of his fiction."¹⁴ And lastly, we need to consider the temporal duration as a variable that will determine the fictional duration of the dialogue, and how this temporal framing affects the festival licence of the fool or slave. The Roman Saturnalia were celebrated between the seventeenth and the nineteenth of December, the time lapse during which slaves would be granted considerable freedom to address their masters. Nevertheless, that freedom would certainly have been considered superseded by time the celebration ended.

Following this convention, claims Bernstein, a more arbitrary, although none the less chronological, limit determines the encounter between, for instance, *Moi* and *Lui* in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. The worlds of Céline and Dostoevsky, on the other hand, seem to be governed by more permanent rules of Carnival inversion of all values, as there is no certainty that the characters ever go back to 'normality' at all, the consequences being

¹³ Bernstein, p. 19.

¹⁴ Ibid.

“far more lethal and savage than the triumphantly ‘regenerative’ ones envisaged by utopian critics.”¹⁵

These variables illustrate the basic patterns that will guide the possible narrative configurations of the works Bernstein examines. Still, the fundamental literary choices regarding how to determine and develop a particular variant, the dominant conventions as regards conceptions of wisdom and folly or power and servitude, will depend on the individual cultural setting. The entire system of beliefs and values will also determine the conceptualisation of moral and psychological categories. An author will not simply reflect an ‘external’ cultural norm; rather he will utilise that shared code where with regard to a buffoon or a madman,

These codes owe their authority both to an acquired familiarity with literary conventions and to contemporary criteria of judgement absorbed, often consciously, from a multiplicity of other public discourses (law, medicine, theology, etc). A writer may intend to demonstrate the inadequacy or limitations of those criteria, but in order to throw them into doubt, he must be able to register them accurately enough in his text so the reader recognizes that his own culture’s values are implicated in the dialogue. As a result, the most successful realizations of the Saturnalian dialogue demonstrate a complex interaction between the relatively fixed and permanent aspects of the paradigm and the purely contingent, historically changing assumptions of the society in which, and sometimes against which, it is composed.¹⁶

Let us recapitulate. So far we have seen that Arlt’s relation with Dostoevsky resides in many common grounds. To begin with, thematically, both authors seem to share a recurrent topic: that is, sympathy for their misfits tinted with social criticism. From the point of view of narrative techniques, Arlt seems to have exploited

¹⁵ Bernstein, p. 20.

¹⁶ Bernstein, p. 21.

heteroglossia, the basic narrative principle of which Bakhtin claims Dostoevsky was the forerunner, by means of which novelistic discourse is always multi-voiced. Moreover, yet another common topos seems to be shared by both authors, that is *ressentiment*.

Bernstein describes Dostoevsky's Fyodor Karamazov as an evolved 'fool'. According to Bernstein, Karamazov is a clever clown, a pseudo-gentleman, an obsessive lecher with hysterical symptoms 'both duper and duped in his lust', and at points he is also a privileged truth-speaker. What is more, just as a fool cannot help exhibiting all those logically incompatible virtues, he is fully aware of all this; thus, he experiences his condition with the agony of a permanent internal laceration. It is the longevity of the Saturnalian dialogue that generated an increasing understanding of its key terms, becoming in its modern version part of both the fictional character's and the reader's projected expectations.

Because abjection is a social and dialogical category and its expression is governed by the mapping of prior literature and cultural modes, it is precisely that internalisation, that sharing of a code, that gives rise to the Abject Hero. Bernstein claims that the self-contempt of figures like Diderot's Jean-François Rameau or Dostoevsky's Underground Man lies in the fact that they are acting according to a 'type', thus, though they are deprived of suffering an 'original' anguish, they are haunted by an already existing model.

Using the traditional literary conventions of the Saturnalian dialogue, the personal and intellectual premises of the wise fool, the author exploits his readership's shared background, playing a double game which creates tension: "It sets the audience's response as tutored by traditional literary conventions – usually along the supposedly subversive lines of championing the rebelliousness and impertinence of the ironist –

against its normal criteria of judgement as expressed in the public discourses of the age.”¹⁷

This new game consists of breaking the stated codes of the Saturnalian dialogues. The readers expect to encounter in the text the standards of ethics and accepted behaviour according to extra-textual standards, on which both readers and author agree. The problem appears when the reader can no longer rely on prior ethical and behavioural codes, as it is those very codes that are brought straight into the text as a ‘thematic crux’. Those values are now the central focus of the debate and cannot be ‘invoked to settle the contest in the work’¹⁸ as it is those same codes that are called into question. Hence, in works such as *Notes from the Underground* or *D’un château l’autre*, readers are made to play by the rules of this new game, one that forces them to occupy the place of stereotyped fictional combatants, preventing them from resolving their debate with any certainty.

Thus, claims Bernstein, the Abject Hero of modern fiction evolved from the Saturnalian dialogues, undergoing a fusion of his abjection with *ressentiment*. Perhaps because abjection lacks sufficient glamour to become the object of critical attention, Bernstein further explains, *ressentiment* grew to be crucial as a historical/literary force worthy of study, abjection being paid little attention. It is, nevertheless, essential to clarify the differences between abjection and *ressentiment*.

The main distinction between the two topoi is their relationship to time and vengeance. Abjection suffers constantly new, usually externally imposed degradation while *ressentiment* is permanently trapped in the slights of the past. Both abjection and *ressentiment* are nourished by lacerated vanity.

¹⁷ Bernstein, p. 22.

¹⁸ Bernstein, p. 23.

[...] but repetition is less crucial to abjection than to *ressentiment*, which experiences its existence as a perpetual recurrence of the same narcissistic injury. Moreover, the man of *ressentiment* is actually proud of his “abjection”, and as in *Notes from Underground*, he sees in it both torment and the sign of its higher consciousness.¹⁹

The Abject Hero has no compensatory pride but neither is he obsessed with fantasizes of revenge on imaginary enemies. Nevertheless, resentful characters are driven by the sense of impotence and frustration in the face of feeling mistreated. They also feed on the hope of forcing others to suffer in their place. Very often, though, characters oscillate between abjection and *ressentiment*²⁰ or, at least, inherit traces of the latter.

Perhaps amongst the most significant characteristics of the Abject Hero, at least in relation to attributing generic paternity to Silvio’s behaviour, is the fact that abjection derives from the fusion of the wise fool of satiric literature with the figure of holy fool of religious parables. Suffering from a sense of impotent superiority derived from attempting to exploit that authority originated on his double ancestry, the Abject Hero seeks to use the freedom of the King’s fool, that is the model of the licensed clown, a model shown by the canonical texts which are recognised by our Abject Hero “whose insights the audience has learned to applaud for their perceptiveness and justice.”²¹ The second element behind the Abject Hero’s fictional ancestry is the Biblical model of the *vox clamantis in deserto* whose imprecations and prophecies came true.²² Thus, self-awareness is at the core of the problem, for the abject consciousness and lucid irony pose the worst torment.

¹⁹ Bernstein, p. 28.

²⁰ Berstein, pp. 103-120.

²¹ Bernstein, p. 30.

²² Edward Dudley, and Maximilian Novak (ed.). *Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1972). In the essays edited by Dudley and Novak, there is considerable discussion concerning how the religious archetype of the “wild man from the desert” proclaims truths that are eventually proved right when all philosophies professed by the official scholars and thinkers are revealed as hollow. Although not unique, this Biblical model has proved the most powerful occurrence of this phenomenon in Western cultures.

Similarly conscious of his role and aware of his inventive potential, yet repeatedly obstructed by the system, Silvio's persistent abject fate haunts him, his complaints revolving around the disparity between his intellectual capacity, the possibility of being socially functional and, perhaps even more importantly, the stigma of being economically dependent:

¿Saldría yo alguna vez de mi ínfima condición social, podría convertirme en algún día en un señor, dejar de ser el muchacho que se ofrece para cualquier trabajo? [...] En el futuro, ¿no sería yo uno de esos hombres que llevan cuellos sucios, camisas zurcidas, botines enormes [...] de tanto caminar solicitando de puerta en puerta trabajo en qué ganarse la vida? [...] No me importa no tener traje, ni plata ni nada— y casi con vergüenza confesé: Lo que yo quiero es ser admirado y elogiado por los demás. ¡Qué me importa ser un perdulario! Eso no me importa...Pero esta vida mediocre...Ser olvidado cuando muera, eso sí que es horrible. ¡Ah, si mis inventos dieran resultado!²³

Inevitably, we are led back to the dialogic nature of the novel. Because the *Object Hero* exists *only* in relationship to others, the *other* voice within the text will prove crucial to make his point.

Drawing the various elements of *El juguete rabioso* together, we may agree that in addition to sharing the Bakhtinian generic premises of *polyphony*, that is *heteroglossia*, the Carnavalesque and the traces of *ressentiment*, Silvio fulfils all the conditions of *Object Hero*:

²³ Arlt, p. 81. "Would I ever rise above my lowly rung on the social ladder? Could I become a Señor one day and stop being the boy who takes any job that comes along? [...] Wouldn't I end my days as one of those men who wear dirty collars and mended shirts, a wine-colored suit and enormous boots [...] walking from door to door asking for work to make ends meet? [...] and I said to myself: *It doesn't matter that I don't have a suit or money or anything [...] what I want is to be admired by others, praised by others. What is it to me if I'm a good-for-nothing Bohemian! It doesn't matter...But this mediocre life...to be forgotten when you die, that, yes, is horrible. Ah, if only my inventions could be successful*" (Aynesworth, pp. 95-6). Notice how Aynesworth adds the phrase 'a wine-colored suit' to Arlt's original.

Crucial to his success is the Abject Hero's exploitation of the knowledge that the dominant culture itself has endowed his marginal position with the compensatory privilege of an access to truths supposedly "denied to those blinkered by or imprisoned in the assumptions of their society". Paradoxically, to refuse the Abject Hero his say would risk condemnation by the eminently reputable conventions that branded him disreputable in the first place.²⁴

Thus, Silvio serves as a plaything of a society that on the one hand praises his knowledge and hardworking nature, and which, in theory, should provide him with a means of advancement in the dog-eat-dog urban maze of Buenos Aires. On the other hand, in practice nothing could be further from the truth since Silvio continually wrestles for survival:

–Es notable lo que sabe este muchacho. ¿Qué edad tiene usted?

–Dieciséis años, señor.

– ¿Dieciséis años?

– ¿Se da cuenta, capitán? Este joven tiene un gran porvenir. ¿Qué le parece si hablamos con el capitán Márquez? Sería una lástima que no pudiera ingresar.

–Indudablemente [...]

–Mire, amiguito, lo felicito, véngase mañana. Esta noche trataré de verlo al capitán Márquez, porque usted se lo merece. Eso es lo que necesita el ejército argentino. Jóvenes que quieran estudiar.²⁵

It is Silvio's knowledge here that gains him the post at the Military Aviation School. Paradoxically, what saves him also condemns him, pushing Silvio further and further into his abjection.

–Vístase de particular y entréguese el uniforme, porque está usted de baja [...].

–Pero si yo no he cometido ninguna falta mi sargento [...] Pero esto es una injusticia, mi sargento [...]

²⁴ Bernstein, p 33.

²⁵ Arlt, pp. 78-9. "It's amazing how much this boy knows. How old are you?' 'Sixteen, señor.' 'Sixteen?' 'You see, captain? This boy has a bright future ahead of him. What do you say we talk to Captain Márquez? It would be a shame if he couldn't enrol.' 'Undoubtedly.' [...] 'Look, little friend, I congratulate you. Come back tomorrow. Tonight I'll try to see Captain Márquez because you deserve it. This is what the Argentine army needs. Young people who want to study.'" (Aynesworth, p. 93)

–Vea amigo, el capitán Márquez me habló de usted. Su puesto está en una escuela industrial. Aquí no necesitamos personas inteligentes sino brutos para el trabajo.²⁶

Inexorably, Silvio is haunted by a Darwinian pessimism, a sense of loss that places him at the last crossroads from whence all roads lead to abjection, and thus epitomising Bernstein's notion of *ressentiment*. Silvio knows only too well he is better than his circumstances dictate, and could do better still. Yet, there is nothing he can do to surmount the economic determinism that manipulates his life. It is that knowledge that haunts him and embitters his existence:

For the abject consciousness, self-knowledge, instead of providing the relief of a certain distance from one's predicament, only intensifies it, and a lucid irony about one's plight may be the worst torment of all, since it immediately converts into an additional, especially acute symptom of the very state to diagnose. Here, self-awareness is *not* part of the problem; it is the very core of the problem.²⁷

For Silvio, there seems to be no way out. As we have already mentioned, Silvio's 'inverted Bildungsroman' narrates the journey of a working-class boy not up the social ladder but somehow further down the social scale, reinforcing the idea of living a 'Vida puerca' ("Filthy Life"), thus justifying the original title of the novel. Alienated and discouraged, Silvio grabs his last chance of redeeming himself by trying to find a route into social respectability character. At the end of the novel, we learn that the price he had to pay for a 'decent' job/lifestyle comes at the expenses of friendship and honour. But this is to invert the normal schema of the world since, in everyday life, the prevention of

²⁶ Arlt, pp. 84-5. "'Put on your civvies and turn in your uniform, you're out.' [...] 'But I haven't done anything wrong, Sergeant, [...]', '[...] Look here, friend, Captain Márquez told me about you. You belong in a technical institute. We don't need smart people here, just dumb brutes who can work.'" (Aynesworth, pp. 98-9).

²⁷ Bernstein, p. 30.

such a crime would be deemed decent. In Silvio's distorted, carnivalesque world it is to render himself a social misfit, a despicable character, a traitor, a modern Judas Iscariot.²⁸

Likewise, we have observed that Silvio's condition of 'social bandit' renders him an outlaw. Yet, social bandits, in Hobsbawm's words, "see themselves as separate, as a collective group form, and inferior to the group of the rich/the powerful [...] Resentment is implicit in this relationship. [...] By its very existence it implies challenge to the social order."²⁹ Thus, we may agree that, as a social phenomenon, banditry is about class, wealth and power but also, and perhaps just as importantly, it is about peer-bonding against the oppressors. To an extent, Silvio certainly epitomizes these principles. He is not alone in the struggle for life; after all, he represents that portion of society who survives on petty crime in the underworld of a modern metropolis. In that respect Silvio's condition of 'social banditry' is confirmed when he robs the rich to give to the poor; this is a form of 'social justice' which is exercised by his gang *à la* Rocamboles. The challenge to the social order is at the forefront of his own agenda, concomitant with the nostalgia characterising the end of the Carnival licence, a nostalgia which takes abstract form in his longing for a better world, where social and class distinctions would become irrelevant instead of being insurmountable social hurdles. Silvio realises only too soon that this 'other' world where people have the chance to realise themselves according to their innate potential is only possible under the festive licence of the Carnival. Once the licence is over, cast and cant and hierarchical distinctions return with a vengeance. This *post festum* nostalgia, 'belatedness' as Bernstein calls it, will be present in Silvio's every move and eventually coalesce into abjection as the protagonist realises that Carnival licence is always temporally contingent.

²⁸ As it has been pointed out by Jordan (personal communication with the present writer), class betrayal is seen as a key moment in Arlt's fiction, especially by Marxists.

²⁹ Hobsbawm 2000, pp. 8-9.

At the end of *El juguete rabioso* we witness Silvio's betrayal of Rengo – yet another oblique homage to his master Dostoevsky. In *Crime and Punishment*, we meet Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, a shady character whose only *act* throughout the novel, that is the only significant act which actually occurs outside his own fevered imagination, is the murder of an old lady. Much of the text consists of a complex interior monologue in which we see all the major characters refracted through Raskolnikov's consciousness, thereby entering a 'thoroughly dialoguized interior monologue or macrodialogue.'³⁰ Similarly, Silvio's interior monologues³¹ saturate *El juguete rabioso*, which might likewise be read as a first person psychological study, how Silvio perceives and communicates with the world rather than as a novel in which the action determines the outcome. This is especially true given Silvio's alienated existence: his lack of power over his life; his subservience to others even with regard to work, food, and even choice of reading material. In this sense, the only domain in which Silvio is in complete control is in the privacy of his own mind.

When toying with the idea of turning Rengo in, just like Raskolnikov in his first great interior monologue at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment*, our protagonist actually re-creates other people's potential reactions in response to his own initiative:

³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (ed./tran.) Carl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). In the chapters 'The Hero', and 'the Position of the Author with Regard to the Hero', Bakhtin uses what he describes as Raskolnikov's first interior monologue in *Crime and Punishment* (it is the one about Dunechka's decision to marry Luzhin, Part 1, Chapter 4) which takes place on the second day of the novel's action, just before the final decision to murder the old woman has been taken. In it Bakhtin describes how in an interior dialogue all the voices from the people mentioned in the letter, each concerned with their own "truths" and position in life enter Raskolnikov's head and engage in a *microdialogue*, all of them being double-voiced, with a further conflict of voices taking place in each of them. "Further we hear in Raskolnikov's words both Sonya's voice and Marmeladov's voice. Dialogue has penetrated inside every word, provoking in it a battle and the interruption of one voice by another. This is a microdialogue". Bakhtin, pp 47-78.

³¹ Noticeably, these interior monologues are marked in this 1985 sixth edition of *El juguete rabioso* (the one we are using here) with traditional Spanish conventions used for direct speech. This 'direct speech', as opposed to the internalised form which characterises *Crime and Punishment*, may be due to issues concerned with the earlier translations of Dostoyevsky in which the conventions of interior monologue are not always well understood by translators. This will be the subject of further research. But is it the form of direct speech which dominates *El juguete*? Perhaps the fact that interior monologues are marked as external dialogues reinforces the idea that for the protagonist, distinguishing what happens in his head from what is going on outside it is not to be marked as relevant, not even as different, real life and interior monologue equally populating his reality. For her 2002 translation of *El juguete rabioso*, however, Aynesworth chose italics to mark this discursive technique that Bakhtin also calls *microdialogue*.

En realidad—no pude menos que decirme—soy un locoide [...] pero Rocambole no era menos: asesinaba... yo no asesino. Por unos cuantos francos le levantó falso testimonio a “papá” Nicolo [...] De pronto recordé con nitidez asombrosa este pasaje de la obra [...]

— ¿Y yo?... ¿Yo seré así...? ¿No alcanzaré a llevar una vida fastuosa como la de Rocambole? Y las palabras que antes le había dicho al Rengo, sonaron otra vez en mis orejas, pero como si las pronunciara otra boca [...] Despacio, se desenroscó otra voz en mi oído:

—Canalla... sos un canalla [...].³²

In Silvio’s interior monologues, real and fictional characters have the same authority. This is significant not only because it reveals the conscious artistry of Arlt’s fiction, especially with regard to heteroglossia, with all the implications of authoritative discursive voices within the text, but also because this shading of authoritative voices outside the text with less official ones also becomes evident. As we have observed, high and low literature merge in a continuum, a non-hierarchical canvas reflecting Silvio’s social heteroglossia, an inverted world in which low culture is perhaps a dominant model and fictional voices go hand in hand with real ones.

As we have mentioned before, Silvio’s betrayal of Rengo, is an act which contains many moral implications. In Silvio’s mind:

Una vez solo, varios temores se levantaron en mi entendimiento. Yo vi mi existencia prolongada entre todos los hombres. La infamia estiraba mi vida entre ellos y cada uno de ellos podía tocarme con un dedo. Y yo, ya no me pertenecía a mí mismo para nunca jamás.

[...] Si hago eso me condeno para siempre.

Y estaré solo y seré como Judas Iscariote.

Toda la vida llevaré una pena.

³² Arlt, p. 126. “*The truth is, I had to confess, I’m a low-down scoundrel who’s half crazy; but Rocambole was no less: he murdered people... I don’t. For a few francs he lied under oath and got ‘papa’ Nicolo hanged. [...] Suddenly, with striking clarity, I remembered this passage: [...] I thought to myself: what about me? Will I be like that? Won’t I live a life as flashy as Rocambole’s someday? And the words I had said before to Rengo sounded again in my ear [...] Slowly, another voice crescendoed in my ear: Rat... you rat.*” (Aynesworth, p. 142).

¡Todo los días llevaré una pena!...—y me vi prolongado dentro de los espacios de mi vida interior, como una angustia vergonzosa hasta para mí.

Entonces sería inútil que tratara de confundirme con los desconocidos. El recuerdo, semejante a un diente podrido, estaría en mí, y su hedor me enturbiaría todas las fragancias de la tierra, pero a medida que ubicaba el hecho en la distancia, mi perversidad encontraba interesante la infamia.³³

It is possible that Silvio's betrayal has, at least, two significant readings. On the one hand, this betrayal may pose another example of heteroglossia, reflecting Silvio's acting 'by the book'. *A la Raskolnikov*, Silvio might be choosing to *act*, to do something even if that something means, in the case of the former, murder, and, in the case of the latter, the equally cowardly act of turning informer.

But there is a dimension of realism to this act, too: Silvio is finally giving in to the social forces that have been pulling his strings, surrendering himself to that pessimistic Darwinian determinism which he (and the reader) sees as orchestrating his universe. Significantly, this might be the only act Silvio actually performs that is the result of his volition. He is not pushed to betray his friend; he has other options. Instead, Silvio decides to act, masochistically opting to enshroud himself in guilt, choosing to cloud his conscience for the rest of his life. But even if the act of betrayal means that he will have to 'bear the scar' for the rest of his life, it is at least a scar he has decided to wear, not one imposed on him:

Sí, ¿por qué ha traicionado a su compañero?, y sin motivo. ¿No le da vergüenza tener tan poca dignidad a sus años?

[...]

—Es cierto... Hay momentos en nuestra vida en que tenemos necesidad de ser

³³ Arlt, p.125. "Once alone, I was prey to many fears. I saw my existence stretched out to embrace all human beings. Infamy spread my life among theirs until each one of them touched me with a finger. And I, never would I belong to myself again. *If I do this, I damn myself forever. Everyday I'll bear this scar!*... And I saw myself oozing among the spaces of inner life like a painful thought, shameful even to me. After that it would be useless to pretend I was a nobody. The memory would haunt me like a rotten tooth, and its stench would sour all the smells of the earth; but the more I tried to distance myself from the deed, the more its infamy attracted me." (Aynesworth, p. 141).

canallas, de ensuciarnos hasta adentro, de hacer alguna infamia, yo qué sé... de destrozarnos la vida de un hombre... y después de hecho eso podemos volver a caminar tranquilos. [...] Usted lo ha dicho. Es así. Se cumple con una ley brutal que está dentro de uno. Es así. Es así. Se cumple con la ley de la ferocidad. Es así; pero ¿quién le dijo a usted que hay una ley? ¿dónde aprendió eso?

— Es como un mundo que de pronto cayera encima de nosotros. [...] pero ahora estoy tranquilo. [...] Yo no soy un perverso, soy un curioso de esta fuerza enorme que está en mí.³⁴

We know that Silvio actually had the chance to try and start afresh with his share of the loot had he not turned Rengo in but instead gone ahead with the robbery from the engineer Vitri of those ‘*diez mil mangos*’ (ten thousand pesos in 1926 would be worth about ten thousand pounds in today’s money). This last ‘job’ would also have represented Silvio’s last action towards the creation of a shared social justice since they would be robbing somebody from the ‘other’ world, a symbol epitomizing the very order they despise and whose overthrow is the goal to which they were working.

Instead, Silvio shakes hands with the ‘enemy’ as he sells out to try and enter that ‘other’ world he has been fighting against³⁵.

Arsenio Vitri se levantó, y sonriendo dijo:

— Todo esto está muy bien, pero hay que trabajar. ¿En qué puedo serle útil?

Reflexioné un instante, luego:

— Vea; yo quisiera irme al Sur... al Neuquén... allá donde hay hielos y nubes... y grandes montañas ... quisiera ver la montaña...

— Perfectamente; yo le ayudaré y le conseguiré un puesto en Comodoro; pero

³⁴ Arlt, pp. 133-4. “‘Yes, why did you betray your friend? And for no reason. Aren’t you ashamed to have so little dignity at your age’ [...] ‘That is true... There are times in life when we need to be pigs, to wallow in filth till it steeps inside us, to do some vile deed, I don’t know... to destroy a man’s life forever... and having done that, we can go on our way.’ [...] ‘You’ve spoken the truth. That’s it. We obey a brutal law that’s inside us. That’s it. We obey the law of the jungle. That’s it; but who told you it’s a law? Where did you learn that?’ [...] ‘It’s like a world that has suddenly descended upon us. [...] No. But I’m calm now [...] I’m not perverse, I’m curious—curious to know that enormous force lies within me...’” (Aynesworth, p. 151).

³⁵ In “Arlt: Robar y salir corriendo” (*El Periodista*, no.43, July 1985, unnumbered pagination) David Viñas claims that betraying Rengo in *El juguete rabioso* is an allegory for Arlt’s being seduced by high culture and in the process betraying the working class. See also Paul Jordan’s ‘Las ciencias ocultas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires’ in *Roberto Arlt: A Narrative Journey* (2000, pp 53-62).

ahora váyase porque tengo que trabajar. [...]

Y su mano estrechó fuertemente la mía. Tropecé con una silla... y salí.³⁶

Relentlessly Silvio represents the plaything of the city, acting and living according to somebody else's choice. Significantly, even at the very end, Silvio seems to have no power whatsoever in forging his life for it is Vitri who actually decides his final destiny. Silvio's request to go and live quietly in the mountains appears to have no effect on Vitri's offer to help him find a job in Comodoro Rivadavia. As Aynesworth rightly points out in her notes to *El juguete rabioso*, "Whereas the province of Neuquén contains some of the highest peaks in the Andes Mountains, Comodoro Rivadavia is an industrial city with an oil refinery on the Atlantic coast. Situated at the foot of an 'arid, dusty hill called Chenque,' its streets 'full of traffic and commercial activity,' it is the 'most important city... in Patagonia'."³⁷

By betraying Rengo, Silvio chooses to damn himself forever, and by so doing reaches the final state of apotheosis of the *Subject Hero*: the compromising of his values in favour of the very ones he despises³⁸. In Bernstein's words:

[...] when the questioner, like Rameau, is fully aware of how deeply he himself is implicated in the behaviour and values he finds ridiculous, a new dimension of painful self-consciousness comes into play, and the entire relationship of the characters to one another, to the position they defend or contest, and, most importantly, to the reader attempting to make sense of the work, is radically changed.³⁹

³⁶ Arlt, p. 135. 'Arsenio Vitri stood and smiled, saying, 'That's all very well, but one has to work. How can I be of use to you?' I thought for a second and answered, 'Look; I'd like to go south... to Neuquén... where there are glaciers and clouds... and tall mountains... I'd like to see the mountains...' 'Fine, I'll help you to find a job in Comodoro; but leave me now because I have to work. [...] and his hand shook mine vigorously. I tripped over a chair... and kept on going'." (Aynesworth, p. 151).

³⁷ Aynesworth, p.167.

³⁸ See J. Ruffinelli's article 'Arlt: complicidad y traición de clase' *Escritura*, year VI, No 12 (Caracas, June-December, 1981).

³⁹ Bernstein, p. 15.

In this fashion, Silvio buys his way into a 'decent' life in the 'other' world. Nevertheless, this betrayal is no passport to start afresh as the shadow of guilt and shame will forever hang over him. That painful dimension of self-consciousness triggered by the Abject Hero's self-awareness will forever haunt Silvio and will continue to cast a shadow over his every step. No longer can he hold on to the psychological satisfaction of being a better man than his more successful peers.

As Bernstein explains:

[...] The Abject Hero is ready to wear motley, but only in order someday to replace the well-dressed courtiers; and he is willing to thunder against the court's degeneracy, but only in the hope of being invited to share its delights. His burden is not merely the contempt he senses from society's spokesman but, more gallingly, his awareness of being a meretricious fraud, usurping without authentic title the oppositional rhetoric invented long before by a host of genuinely formidable and inspired outsiders.⁴⁰

Finally, Silvio seems to drift hopelessly, propelled by the same external forces that have orchestrated his whole life and that will continue to determine his existence, however far from the oppressiveness of Buenos Aires he might be sent, epitomising Arlt's harsh reality of overwhelming social determinism. Perhaps Arlt is implicitly denouncing the fact that social determinism is unavoidable, that the stigma of the Abject Hero will be with him forever, that surmounting socio-cultural boundaries is hardly possible, that the 'law' of the urban jungle is in an ever present reality.

⁴⁰ Bernstein, p. 30.

Outwitting the Oppressor: Roberto Arlt and the Rise of the Detective Story

“Oh! Comme je comprends l’amour de Baudelaire pour ce grand Ténébreux qu’on lit en frissonnant!” Rubén Darío.¹

I. The Genealogy of a Popular Genre

The development of the detective story was largely the result of a three-way interchange involving Britain, France and North America. At the centre of that interchange we find Edgar Allan Poe. Poe’s writings, particularly ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841) – though Poe’s tale would hardly have been possible without the wealth of French material involving hoaxes and practical jokes published in *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* in the late 1830s. Likewise, the *roman judiciaire*, as constructed by Gaboriau and du Boisgobey in the 1860s and 70s, would have been unimaginable without Baudelaire’s translations of Poe in the 1850s. More generally, it was through Baudelaire’s translations that Poe was recycled throughout the rest of Continental Europe and South America while in Britain, at least as far as the detective story is concerned, his impact was first felt through his ablest French disciple, Emile Gaboriau. In this way, it is not only French letters that have been shaped by Poe’s work. Sherlock Holmes, for example, could not have come into being without the *roman judiciaire*, itself a product of Poe’s influence, from which Conan Doyle drew so many of his ideas.²

¹ *Opiniones*, “Mundo Latino”, vol. X, p70.

² For a useful overview of this line of inquiry, see Hale: ‘Popular Fiction’, in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, Vol. IV, (ed.) Peter France and Kenneth Haynes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 371-381.

When we look at Spanish *belles lettres*,³ the authoritativeness of French literature in the Spanish-speaking world is undeniable. Similarly, when we look at the influence Poe had on South American literature, the Anglo-American legacy becomes equally incontestable. For Nicaraguan Modernist Rubén Darío (1867-1916), who is largely responsible for reviving and circulating Poe in Latin America, ‘no other American author has so fertilized the intellect and imagination of Central and South America as has Poe’.⁴ Ever since Baudelaire’s 1856 *Histoires extraordinaires* and his *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires* (published a year later) Poe’s force in Spanish and Latin American literature has been crucial. Since then, a long, uninterrupted line of Poe-inspired versions, rewritings and translations of his works have thrived both in Spain and the Americas. With a few exceptions, most Peninsular and Latin American translations clearly bear the evidence of their French source by means of a reworking of the titles bestowed by Baudelaire on individual stories or collections: e.g. *Aventures d’Arthur Gordon Pym* (1858), *Eureka* (1863), *Histoires Grotesques et Sérieuses* (1865). The rendering of these titles into Spanish clearly indicates that relay translation is involved.⁵ Further evidence that the Spanish translations indeed derived from the French versions is provided by the almost invariable order in which the tales appear, which also follows that of Baudelaire’s editions. Englekirk remarks that “with but a chance rearrangement [...] the tales have all been taken *en masse* from either *Histoires*

³ See *American Literature in Spain* by John De Lancey Ferguson (New York: Instituto de las Españas en los Estados Unidos, 1934) p. 55. Though Ferguson focuses mainly on the Spanish translation and criticism of Poe, the conclusion to which he comes is disappointingly arbitrary and naïve: “though Poe won no distinguished followers he at least stimulated a healthy reaction.” (p. 86).

⁴ Cited by Alphonso Smith in *Edgar Allan Poe: How to Know Him* (New York: Garden City Publishing Co., 1921) pp 11-14. All subsequent translations of titles, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

⁵ A few examples will suffice to sustain this argument. Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ is translated by Baudelaire as ‘Double Assassinant dans la rue Morgue’ and in Spanish as ‘Doble asesinato en la calle de Morgue’ (or calle Morgue); Poe’s ‘The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym’ becomes ‘Les Aventures d’ Arthur Gordon Pym’ in French and ‘Aventuras de Arturo Gordon Pym’ in Spanish. Likewise, ‘A Tale of the Ragged Mountains’ is rendered ‘Les Souvenirs de M. Auguste Bedloe’ by Baudelaire and ‘Los recuerdos de Augusto Bedloe’ in Spanish. Finally ‘Some Words with a Mummy’ is translated as ‘Petit discussion avec une Momie’ and ‘Pequeña discusión con una momia’ in French and Spanish respectively.

extraordinaires or from the *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires*”.⁶ Both Baudelaire’s French versions and peninsular Spanish editions enjoyed common currency throughout the Spanish-speaking world, unlike the original English-language editions which, though occasionally in evidence, were less well known until much later because of the inevitable language barrier.⁷

Following the same general tendencies of literary development in other former Spanish colonies, various currents in detective fiction made their way from Europe, particularly from France and England, into Latin America. As the traditional birthplace of all literary genres, both the scholar and the ordinary reader tend to be strongly exposed to material from Europe and the United States. However, although less prolific than their North American, British or French counterparts, Hispanic American authors have not only cultivated the genre for over a century but have also made important contributions to the development of the form, though this may be by means of translation, rewriting, domestication,⁸ pastiche or parody. Likewise, four main writing and publishing centres, namely the River Plate (comprising Argentina and Uruguay), Brazil, Cuba and Mexico, have all played a role not only in promoting the consumption of imported material but also in creating their own *literatura policial*.⁹ As Simpson highlights, Latin American *literatura policial*, in addition to replicating the traditional genre subdivisions (e.g. whodunit, hardboiled), also raises questions about “the genre’s role: an innocuous form of entertainment, a vehicle for social protest, an instrument of

⁶ John Eugene Englekirk, *Edgar Allan Poe in Hispanic Literature* (New York: Instituto de las Españas en los Estados Unidos, 1934), p. 25.

⁷ Englekirk mentions that as well as peninsular Spanish, both French and English editions of Poe’s works are listed in the catalogue of Librería Sucre, Quito, Ecuador. (See Englekirk 1934, p. 34).

⁸ Under Scleiermacher’s influence, Venuti divides translation strategies into two opposing poles he calls ‘foreignisation’ and ‘domestication’ according to the degree of proximity between ST and TT (source and target text). See Chapter 7 and also Venuti, 1995, pp. 17-27.

⁹ For a closer analysis of detective fiction in the Americas see Donald Yates, *El cuento policial latinoamericano* (Mexico: Andrea, 1964); José Antonio Portuondo, *Astrolabio* (Havana: Arte y Literatura, 1977), (ed) Amâncio Moacir, *Chame o ladrão: Contos policiais brasileiros* (São Paulo: Edições Populares, 1978), Ilan Stavans, *Antiheroes, Mexico and its Detective Novel*, (tran.) Jesse H. Lytle and Jennifer A. Mattson (USA: Associated University press, 1997), Ernest Mandel, *Crimen delicioso. Historia social del relato policíaco* (México, UNAM, 1986), and Patricia Hart, *The Spanish Sleuth* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1987).

ideological persuasion, or a framework within which to debate social, ethical or literary problems.”¹⁰

Compared with North American, English and even French detective fiction, as Lafforgue and Rivera point out, and despite having been extensively cultivated in the River Plate, the Argentine *policial* lacks authorial specialization, something we perhaps have not achieved to this day. Argentine detective fiction, they also contend, lacks high productivity, mass market circulation, support from a powerful publishing industry (which even in the 1940s and 1950s lagged far behind that of the US) and, perhaps more importantly, the development of a clearly defined style, a type of narrative that we could call our own.¹¹ Yet, in Argentina, and despite what Lafforgue and Rivera consider clear handicaps, detective fiction has been massively translated, domesticated, written about and consumed, as well as produced, both by cultural elitist literati and by popular authors.

According to Simpson,¹² detective literature developed in Latin America as an imported form. As such, it bears the marks of other historical and cultural realities. Nevertheless, critics point to “[t]he River Plate [as] the source of the earliest as well as the most detective fiction in Latin America.”¹³ With only sporadic local production, the River Plate readership was consistently exposed to foreign detective fiction from the late nineteenth century well into the 1930s. In the 1940s, the endorsement of Argentina’s intellectual elite, especially Borges, Bioy Casares (co-editors of the *Séptimo Círculo* collection) and Victoria Ocampo (through her literary magazine *Sur*), transformed the genre not only in terms of popularity but also, and perhaps more importantly, in terms of prestige. Throughout that decade, and with the further support

¹⁰ See Amelia Simpson, *Detective Fiction from Latin America* (US: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 9.

¹¹ See Jorge Lafforgue, Prologue to *Cuentos policiales argentinos* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1997), pp. 9-23. and Jorge Lafforgue and Jorge Rivera, *Narrativa policial en la Argentina* (Capítulo Series, 104. Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1981), p. 341.

¹² Simpson, p. 10.

¹³ Simpson, p. 29.

of the same figures, detective fiction gained respectability and acceptance in Argentina. Both as a 'literary' phenomenon worthy of the educated reader and also as a popular form of entertainment available to the less educated, crime writing began to find a wider readership. Until then, the main model cultivated by Argentine writers had been the *realto problema* (i.e. whodunit), exploiting the ludic possibilities of the formula mainly for satirical purposes, philosophical speculation or intellectual games. The *serie dura* (hard-boiled) tradition started to come to the fore only in the 1950s as resistance towards a form of writing which was initially considered vulgar began to crumble. By the 1970s the *serie dura* dominated native production, owing, perhaps, to the unstable socio-political setting: violence and corruption have typically been strongly represented in hard-boiled novels, a form which lends itself easily to the discussion of political or social topics on one hand but can equally be used to conceal its ideological position on the other.¹⁴

The 'repertoire' of the *Séptimo Círculo* series is particularly worthy of attention. Though Argentina did produce detective fiction before the 1940s, as editors of the *Colección Séptimo Círculo* Borges and Bioy Casares vigorously supported and promoted foreign authors. Borges, in particular, was closely associated with Anglo-Saxon literary culture. However, one cannot ignore the fact that a certain 'snob' factor was also involved with regard to foreign literature (the same phenomenon can be witnessed in Britain in the nineteenth century when the literati preferred to read Russian authors in French translation rather than English versions). Indeed, the preference for imported fiction was so strong that more than ninety per cent of the sixty-three writers included in the *Séptimo Círculo* collection are from overseas. There are three titles by Anthony Berkeley (issues 59, 62 and 69); eight by C. Day Lewis writing as Nicholas Blake (issues 1, 13, 28, 35, 46, 76, 91, 118); three by James Cain (issues 5, 11, 20); two

¹⁴ It is perhaps worth pointing out that in Argentina alone there were actually nine coups between 1930 and 1981.

by Wilkie Collins (issues 20, 30); Anton Chekov (most biographers pass over in silence the fact that Chekov's first published novel, issued as a serial in a newspaper, was an imitation of the Gaboriau-style *roman judiciaire*), Agatha Christie. G. K. Chesterton and Charles Dickens were all published once (issues 9, 69, and 78 respectively). John Dickson Carr, a specialist in 'locked-room' mysteries, features nine times under his full name (issues 2, 18, 33, 37, 40, 52, 60, 64, 70) and on a further four occasions as Dickson Carr (issues 74, 104, 107, 110). There are seven novels by Anthony Gilbert (issues 4, 10, 32, 45, 57, 65, 67), three pieces by Graham Greene (15 and two in issue 72) and eight novels by Patrick Quentin (issues 17, 21, 39, 50, 51, 61, 63, 87). Amongst the very few local authors to appear in the collection are *Los que aman, odian* (issue 31) by Adolfo Bioy Casares and his wife Silvina Ocampo; *La muerte baja en ascensor* by María Angélica Bosco; *El estruendo de las rosas* (48) by Manuel Peyrou; Enrique Amorim's *El asesino desvelado* (issue 14, although Uruguayan, Amorim lived and published in Buenos Aires). It is also worth noting that other Argentine authors published under pseudonyms: Eduardo Morera wrote under the name of Max Duplan, Alejandro Ruiz Guiñazú published *Bajo el signo del odio* (issue 102) as Alexander Rice Guinness, and Roger Pla's *El llanto de Némesis* came out under the *nom de plume* of Roger Ivnes. These last works, off course, represent examples of the phenomenon of pseudo-translation. As is often the case, the names are not quite convincing: Guinness is presumably a corruption of Guinness and Ivnes of Innes.

Despite the fact that some commentators claim that Argentine detective fiction as such only begins in the 1940s,¹⁵ publishing history suggests otherwise. Valdemiro

¹⁵ For Yates, the 1940s puzzle type detective novel *Con la guadaña al hombro* [*The reaper's scythe*], by Abel Mateo (writing under the name of Diego Keltiber), constitutes the "first authentic major work of detective fiction to be written by an Argentine" (Simpson, p. 34). Equally, in *Diez cuentos policiales argentinos*, the first anthology of Argentine *literatura policial*. Rodolfo Walsh observes that 1942 marks the possible inauguration of locally produced detective fiction; "Hace diez años, en 1942, apareció el primer libro de cuentos policiales en castellano. Sus autores eran Jorge Luis Borges y Adolfo Bioy Casares. Se llamaba *Seis problemas para don Isidoro Parodi*". Walsh here is perhaps specifically

Ayala Gauna, amongst other commentators, has suggested that, in Latin America, Argentina was the first to produce national works involving some element of detection. Indeed, only a few decades after Poe's 1841 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', writers such as Eduardo Gutiérrez (1851-1889), José Mármol (1818-1871), Saturnino Muniagurria (1870-1972) and Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888) were publishing a rudimentary form of detective literature. In the Argentina of the 1880s, other writers, notably Paul Groussac (1848-1929), Eduardo Ladislao Holmberg (1852-1937), Carlos Monsalve (1860?-1923), Carlos Olivera (born 1884)¹⁶ and Luis V. Varela (pseudonym of Raúl Waleis, 1945-1911) also penned detective stories on an occasional basis as part of a wider contribution to the development of a local popular culture.

One useful methodological approach for examining cultural phenomena of this kind has been developed by Roger Chartier.¹⁷ Chartier uses the Biblioteca Azul series, a popular collection published in the France of the Ancient Regime, as a case study. After scrutinising various catalogues, the circulation of titles, and printing details, Chartier concludes that highbrow and popular culture are both dynamic categories and also prone to mutual influence. Chartier argues that contrary to what many critics propose, highbrow and popular culture are not always opposing forces. Following Bakhtin, he further claims that at certain points in history the highbrow traditions feed on the popular; yet, as he also acknowledges, the Biblioteca Azul also drew on high culture. Such combinations of erudite and popular culture should not be seen as a mere juxtaposition of traditions but as producing a solid 'cultural fusion'. More

drawing attention to Borges and Bioy Casares' sleuth Don Isidro Parodi as a foundational national detective, a *criollo* Dupin. (See Rodolfo Walsh (ed.), Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1953), p 7.

¹⁶ It took about ten years for Poe to cross the Atlantic in terms of translation. In 1869 the *Revista Argentina* offered an anonymous version of 'The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether'. The first collection of short stories and novels to appear in Argentina was translated from English by Carlos Olivera; *Novelas y cuentos* (Paris: Garnier, 1884). The place of publication exemplifies French cultural hegemony.

¹⁷ See Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, (tran.) [from the French] L.G. Cochrane, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987) and *Sociedad y escritura en la Edad Moderna* (México: Instituto Mora, 1995).

significantly, it can be argued that popular culture does not emerge from the hegemonic imposition of a dominant group but results from a series of negotiations, which are observable to the historian.

Chartier's model involves the examination of publishing history as a primary means of analysis. By exploring the actual fabrication and circulation of printed texts, clues may be ascertained as to the reading practices that they generated. We shall attempt here to provide a similar analysis of various popular sub-literary collections published during the first decades of the twentieth century in Argentina, suggesting that the significance of the detective genre has long been overlooked in favour of more 'serious' literature. This is of particular importance with regard to Roberto Arlt's literary production, a significant proportion of which relates to detective fiction. After all, Arlt's literary activities in this field cannot be properly evaluated unless we know what value to place upon the development of that genre within the context of Argentina's cultural development.

II. The Case of Roberto Arlt

The case of Roberto Arlt, as was suggested earlier, is an unusual one. Though primarily associated with narrative prose, the theatre and newspaper journalism, his short story production (mainly published in magazines, except the 1933 *El jorobadito*) has been scarcely discussed. At the beginning of the 1950s, when Raúl Larra provided a useful reappraisal of Arlt in his *Roberto Arlt, el torturado* (1950), critics began linking Arlt with other popular genres, particularly on the basis of his *Aguafuertes* series, a column published in *El Mundo* newspaper. Lafforgue and Rivera claim that despite the revitalising works of critics such as Oscar Massota, Diana Guerrero, Ángel Núñez, David Maldavsky and José Amícola over the last few decades, there seems to be no

mention of Arlt's production of detective fiction¹⁸. With the exceptions of *El criador de gorilas*,¹⁹ a collection of short stories, and Adolfo Prieto's prologue to *Viaje terrible* (Arlt's 1941 *nouvelle*), in which Prieto links Arlt to the fantastic, crime writing, and science fiction, very few critics seem to have paid any attention to Arlt's association with genres normally associated, in Argentina at least, with ephemeral periodicals. Indeed, when discussing 'El traje del fantasma', Prieto himself, who recognises the 'corte policial' ('detective type') of tale, also mentions that it is one of Arlt's 'atypical' stories'.²⁰ But does Arlt really produce *literatura policial* as such and, if so, what is the literary background of Arlt's writing?

At the turn of the century detective fiction in Argentina was still considered a genre unsuitable for a writer with serious, let alone scholarly, pretensions such as Groussac or Holmberg. In 1897, perhaps in an attempt to dissociate his name from a genre of so little status, as Bajarlía suggests,²¹ Groussac anonymously reprinted his main contribution to the genre, 'El candado de oro' ['The Golden Lock' of 1884], under the title of 'La pesquisa' ['The investigation'] in *La Biblioteca*, a literary periodical that he himself directed. Indeed, writing detective fiction in Argentina and in the River Plate remains a marginal activity from 1896 until well into the twentieth century. Translations, on the other hand, were warmly embraced. Despite the disapproval of the educated, the number of titles published suggests that detective fiction enjoyed widespread dissemination. At the beginning of the 1900s, authors such as Poe, Gaboriau, Conan Doyle, Gaston Leroux and Maurice Leblanc were not only enthusiastically received but sold in large numbers. Take for instance Gaston Leroux's

¹⁸ See Jorge Lafforgue and Jorge B. Rivera (ed.), *Asesinos de papel* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 1996, first published in Buenos Aires: Calicanto, 1977), p. 137.

¹⁹ *El criador de gorilas* (Santiago de Chile: Zig-Zag, 1941) is a compilation of short stories published in magazines towards the end of the 1930s. It was subsequently re-edited in Argentina in 1959 (Buenos Aires: Futuro) with a prologue by Mirta Arlt (Buenos Aires: Fabril), in 1964 (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA), in 1968 with a prologue by Raúl Larra, in 1982 (Buenos Aires: Losada) and twice in Madrid (Alborada: 1991 and Alianza, 1994).

²⁰ See *Viaje terrible* (Buenos Aires: Tiempo Contemporáneo, 1969).

²¹ See Juan Jacobo Bajarlía (ed.), *Cuentos de crimen y de misterio* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Álvarez, 1964).

1907 *Le Mystère de la Chamber Jaune* [*The Mystery of the Yellow Room*]; notably, it was published in Buenos Aires only a year after it appeared in Paris in serial form in *L'Illustration* (and a year ahead of an English translation). Two decades later, Agatha Christie, Earle Stanley Gardner and S. S. Van Dine entered the market with considerable force. At the same time, a number of publishing houses such as Tor, Molino and collections such as the *Biblioteca de Oro* promoted different variants ranging from crime-adventure stories through to the classic whodunit. Some of these publishers even launched entire series devoted exclusively to the genre. The hard-boiled school, on the other hand, took longer to reach Argentina. Lafforgue and Rivera comment that works by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett were first translated and distributed only in the 1940s (as in France, their reception was relatively late). Even then, they received little attention. It was not until the 1960s, on being reissued, that they found a ready audience – and that, as we have already suggested, might be closely linked to local political circumstances.²²

As we have also mentioned, despite the fact that some commentators attribute the first national *policiales* to the 1940s,²³ there seems to be an agreement that some ‘isolated exponents of the genre’ did indeed appear in Argentina as far back as the late 1880s and 1890s. In *Cuentos policiales argentinos*, Fermín Fèvre highlights that in fact the first detective-type tales “con conciencia y conocimiento del género”²⁴ appeared in Argentina in the 1890s with the work of Carlos Monsalve, Luis V. Varela, Eduardo Holmberg and Paul Groussac.²⁵ Though little was produced in the River Plate in the

²² See Jorge Lafforgue and Jorge B. Rivera, (ed.), *Asesinos de papel* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Colihue, 1996), p 21. This work was first published in 1977 (Buenos Aires: Calicanto).

²³ Yates signals *Con la guadaña al hombro* [*The Reaper's Scythe*], as the “first authentic major work of detective fiction to be written by an Argentine.” See also See Rodolfo Walsh 1953.

²⁴ Cited in Lafforgue and Rivera, 1996, p. 32.

²⁵ See Fermín Fèvre (ed.), *Cuentos policiales argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Kapeluz, 1974. *Grandes Obras de la Literatura Universal*), p. 49. There are other examples such as Eduardo Gutiérrez's *folletines* (1851-1889) and ‘*relatos costumbristas*’ by Fray Mocho (writing under the pseudonym of José S. Alvarez, 1858-1903) that, although more or less forgotten today, have detective-like elements and thus could, and

early 1900s, there are a couple of names worth mentioning. One is that of Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937), author of the case of 'El triple robo de Bellamore' [Bellamore's triple robbery] (1903), perhaps his most significant detective story. The story, the only one in this style penned by the Uruguayan writer, belongs to Quiroga's transitional stage and, like much of his later work, is clearly influenced by Poe. As Simpson comments, Quiroga's story 'suggests that the detective genre, with its exaltation of reason and logic, can also be considered a model of amorality and social irresponsibility, one which translates real and ethical issues into cerebral games for the dilettante.'²⁶

Perhaps the two pieces that particularly contribute to the development of the genre in Argentina are Groussac's 1884 'El candado de oro' ['The Golden Lock'] and Holmberg's 1896 'La bolsa de huesos' ['The Sack of Bones'].²⁷ Both share many characteristics that anticipate Argentine detective fiction, especially with regard to the extent to which they exploit intellectual, ethical, social and literary ideas. Of the two stories, Simpson considers Holmberg's by far the more sophisticated because of the devices used in the construction of the text.²⁸ The use of parody and the typical detective strategy of withholding information create the suspense effect central to the genre. In both Groussac's and Holmberg's tales the detective-narrators violate the conventions of the genre by allowing the culprit to escape unpunished, perhaps voicing doubts as to the efficacy of the administration of justice. These stories also challenge other conventions of the genre that had by this period begun to establish themselves.

indeed should, be considered Argentine precursors of a genre that was only consolidated much later in the 1900s.

²⁶ Simpson, p. 31.

²⁷ Both Groussac and Holmberg were distinguished scholars and literati of their time. Groussac was a French born historian, critic, fiction writer and essayist and was director of the Biblioteca Nacional from 1885 to his death in 1929. Groussac's story 'La pesquisa' appears in *El cuento policial* ((ed.), J. Lafforgue and J. Rivera, Buenos Aires: 1981, pp. 7-23). Holmberg, on the other hand, was a medical practitioner and a naturalist, and amongst much else was the director of the Buenos Aires zoo. He contributed regularly to scholarly publications in his field but he also spoke seven languages and translated works by Dickens and, significantly, Conan Doyle. In 1896, Holmberg published two other detective-type tales but he is generally associated with the *literatura fantástica* since his tales contain supernatural elements.

²⁸ Simpson, p. 30.

Both Groussac and Holmberg are evidently familiar with detective models but the influence of Emile Gaboriau is particularly evident.²⁹ What makes Groussac's and Holmberg's stories stand out is the use of humour and satire, something that later writers, particularly highbrow literati such as Borges and Bioy Casares, would also exploit. Up to that point, the genre had been considered mainly an imported form, but Groussac and Holmberg transpose the model to an Argentine setting and add a particular ideological point of view, turning them into original stories and 'autonomous expressions'.³⁰

As early as the mid 1910s, popular collections following the 'dime novel' style began to flourish in Argentina. Argentine periodicals such as *La Novela Semanal*, *El Cuento Ilustrado* and *La Novela Universitaria* begin to feature detective tales, though at irregular intervals and mainly in the shape of juvenile publications in the style of *Nick Carter* and *Buffalo Bill* (both US imports). This early interest of both writers and readers in American-style magazines prefigures North American cultural hegemony. Between 1918 and 1922, *El Cuento Ilustrado*, *La Novela Semanal*, *Bambalinas y Gran Guignol*, all show the incursion of local authors into the detective genre. Titles like *El botón del calzoncillo* ['The underwear button'] by Eustaquio Pellicer (1859-1937), *El crimen de la mosca azul* ['The crime of the blue fly'] by Enrique Richard Lavalle, *El misterio del dominó* ['The domino mystery'] by Arístides Rabello, *El crimen de Liniers* ['The Liniers crime'] by Enzo Aloisi suggest the growing appeal of this kind of fiction. But it is not until the 1930s that the genre begins to really establish itself, as a variety of publishing houses inaugurate series inspired by the American *pulps*. Launched in 1929

²⁹ With works such as *L'Affaire Lerouge* (1863, translated as *The Widow Lerouge*, 1873), *Le Crime d'Orcival* (1867, translated as *The Mystery of Orcival*, 1871) and particularly *Monsieur Lecoq* (1869, translated in 1880), Emile Gaboriau (1832-73) was responsible for combining Poe's model of 'ratiocination' with themes more closely linked with the French *feuilleton*. These novels earned him the title of the 'father of the detective novel' and established the general trend of European detective fiction that later influenced authors such as Conan Doyle. In his introduction to the 1975 translation of *Monsieur Lecoq*, Bleiler calls him 'the godfather of Sherlock Holmes' (E. F. Bleiler (ed.), New York: Dover, 1975, p. xx).

³⁰ Simpson, p. 32.

by the popular Editorial Tor, the fortnightly *Magazine Sexton Blake* (here the model is British) offers a mixture of adventure, detective fiction, and the Rocambolesque hero. In 1931, the same Editorial Tor introduced the *Colección Misterio*, recycled later in the *Serie Wallace* (after the British thriller writer Edgar Wallace), which featured more middle-brow detective fiction by authors such as Anthony Berkeley, Henry Wade, John Dickson Carr, Rufus King, and J. S. Fletcher to name but a few,³¹ though the inclusion of Sax Rohmer, a writer of distinctly low-brow thrillers, only shows that these terms are relative. In the late 1930s, another two collections appeared: *Hombres Audaces* and *Biblioteca de Oro*. Published by Editorial Molino, they featured series such as 'El Vengador', 'Jim Wallace' and 'La Sombra' that juxtapose action and suspense in the manner of the American pulps. The 1938 *Biblioteca de Oro* offered weekly novels in the series 'Azul', 'de aventuras', and 'Amarilla' (['Yellow'], the colour associated with the detective genre possibly inspired by the Victorian 'yellowbacks'),³² all including classic whodunits by Earl D. Biggers, S. S. Van Dine, and Agatha Christie, together with more sensational works by Edgar Wallace and court-room dramas by Earle Stanley Gardner. Significantly, as Lafforgue and Rivera note, in 1943 the *Biblioteca de Oro* collection issued what is perhaps the earliest translation into Spanish of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (as *Detective por correspondencia*).³³ As Lafforgue and Rivera comment, throughout the first decades of the new century, despite the examples previously mentioned, the Argentine production of the genre is still 'partial, fragmentary and scattered'.³⁴ In the 1930s, however, a few more significant titles appear: Enrique Anderson Imbert's tale 'Las maravillosas deducciones del detective

³¹ See Lafforgue and Rivera, 1996, p. 15.

³² 'Yellowbacks', so called because of their glossy yellow illustrated boards, broke the mould of Victorian publishing by costing a mere two shillings as opposed to the 31'6 which had been the price of a standard three-volume novel since the 1820s. These collections, published in series such as Routledge's Railway Library, covered a broad range of genres ranging from popular classics to sensationalist fiction. Yellow is also associated with sensationalist fiction in France (notably, the *Le Masque* collection launched in 1926); in Italy 'giallo', favoured by the publisher Mondadori, is virtually a synonym for crime writing. These last two collections slightly predate developments in Argentina and could equally have had a role in the choice of book wrappers.

³³ Lafforgue and Rivera, 1996, p. 33.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Gamboa',³⁵ Sauli Lostals' novel *El enigma de la calle Arcos* (1932), the novel *El crimen de la noche de bodas* (1933), published in instalments by the journalist Alberto Cordone under the pseudonym of Jacinto Amenábar, together with some of the *cuentos policiales* of Leonardo Castellani (also published in *La Nación*). Likewise, a couple of detective stories are included in two anthologies: Victor Guillot's *Terror* (1937) and Nicolás Olivari's *La noche es nuestra* (1952).

Equally significant, is the contribution of Conrado Nalé Roxlo. This is particularly interesting with regard to Arlt since Roxlo would provide him with his first paid job as a writer. With his emphasis on humour and pastiche, Nalé Roxlo paved the way for later publications with a comic intent such as Dante Quintero's 1936 comic strip *Paturuzú* and, in 1941, *Cascabel* founded by Emilio Villalba Welsh.³⁶ Parallel to this, or, more precisely, between 1937 and 1940, various early short stories by Roberto Arlt appeared in magazines such as *Mundo Argentino* and *El Hogar*. These were not unearthed until five decades later when they were reprinted in *El crimen casi perfecto* (1994), edited by Omar Borré.

IV. Cultural Misappropriation and the National Tradition

*Ladrón que roba a ladrón...*³⁷

Where does Arlt derive his inspiration? What school or tradition does he follow, and, more importantly, what is his contribution to Argentine detective fiction? In his

³⁵ *La Nación*, 29, IX, 1930.

³⁶ The other two magazines, *Cascabel* and *Rico Tipo*, feature Nalé Roxlo's 'stylistic exercises' in parody ('In the manner of...'): among the author's subjects are Borges ('Homicidio filosófico'), Chesterton ('Nuevas aventuras del Padre Brown') and Conan Doyle ('Los crímenes de Londres'). Lafforgue and Rivera point out that Roxlo's stories were published in newspapers as well as in book form. The humour section 'Algo por alguien' of the *Crítica* newspaper often featured Roxlo: 'Jim el sonriente', a tale in the manner of Chesterton, appears in the 17 April 1937 edition. His 1943 *Antología apócrifa* reprints a selection of these stories. See Lafforgue and Rivera, 1996, p. 33.

³⁷ This is part of a popular saying: 'ladrón que roba a ladrón, cien años de perdón' [a thief who steals from another thief gets one hundred years of absolution or pardon].

‘Breve historia de una apropiación’,³⁸ Manuel Rud examines the ‘identity’ of Argentine detective fiction. Following Derrida’s concept of a literary genre as a ‘shape without a shape’,³⁹ Rud claims that attempting to define a popular genre such as the detective story, whose main characteristic consists of the repetition of certain patterns, is something of an uphill task. Nevertheless, popular genres such as melodrama, the detective story, and science fiction help define certain artistic tendencies and the construction of certain patterns of meaning (both highbrow and popular) within a given society. Rud goes on to claim that it is by no means implausible that detective fiction, in addition to any information that might be derived about readership trends, might also reveal information about a particular society’s attitude towards crime and the construction of discourses. As Mandel points out, “la evolución de la literatura policíaca refleja la historia misma del crimen”.⁴⁰ Thus, narratives related to the history of crime “pondrían en escena las percepciones con que operan los ‘modos del delito’ y su configuración y circulación en los ‘modos de la ficción.’”⁴¹

Turning towards the analysis of River Plate fiction, and in particular the Argentine *policial*, we find that the relationship between crime and national literary discourse is a particularly complex one, even leaving apart the issue of prestige. Rud is surely correct when he suggests that Argentine detective fiction displays a tendency towards misappropriating ‘universal’ detective fiction conventions for its own creative purposes, though we might bridle at the labelling of this act as a ‘crime’ (presumably

³⁸ See Manuel Rud, ‘Breve historia de una apropiación. Apuntes para una aproximación al género policial en la Argentina’, published on <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero17/apropia.html> (consulted 15 November 2005).

³⁹ Jaques Derrida, ‘La ley del género’, from ‘La loi du genre’, in *Glyph*, 7 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980: 7). Translated for Universidad de Buenos Aires (Teoría y Análisis Literario ‘C’) by Ariel Schettini, 1991.

⁴⁰ Mandel, Ernest, *Crimen delicioso. Historia social del relato policiaco* (México, UNAM, 1986).

⁴¹ See note 25.

that of plagiarism). The ‘crime’ of pocketing literary traditions for creative purposes is not only a victimless one but also a productive one. Following Borges’ ‘El escritor argentino y la tradición’,⁴² Rud goes on to discuss the fact that Argentine literature is part of a more ‘general’ tradition in the sense that it is parodying, or appropriating the characteristics of Western literature as a whole.

The question of Latin American identity and the role of translation, rewriting and cultural borrowing has, off course, long been at the heart of critical thought. Borges’ seminal lecture ‘El escritor argentino y la tradición’ sought to shed some light on the matter, becoming as it did a road map which writers from Argentina (as well as those from elsewhere in Latin America, and perhaps on the margins in general) used to position themselves with respect to Occidental canons, without being defined and restricted by them. According to Borges, the crucial step is to assume a stance of irreverence. In Waisman’s opinion, it is at this crossroads of displacement and irreverence, enacted through re-readings and mistranslations that the potential of writers on the margins can be realised. Ricardo Piglia, to name but one of the later commentators for whom this issue took on an urgency, suggested numerous ways in which to reread the Argentine tradition in terms of what comes before and after Borges. It is this, claims Waisman, that has allowed Piglia ‘to exploit the possibilities laid out by his predecessors and to put them into practice in the troubled socio-political climate in which he writes’.⁴³ Without a doubt, Borges and Arlt represent the two most important and pivotal aesthetics of twentieth-century Argentine literature. As Piglia himself comments:

⁴² This is part of the notes of a lecture given by Borges at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, later included in *Discusión* (1932), *Obras Completas* (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1996, volume I).

⁴³ See ‘Ethics and Aesthetics North and South: Translation in the Work of Ricardo Piglia’ by Sergio Waisman http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_language_quarterly/v062/62.3waisman.html (accessed 3 January 2006).

Cruzar a Arlt con Borges, para usar una metáfora positivista, es una de las grandes utopías de la literatura argentina. Creo que esa tentación, más o menos conciente, está en Onetti, en Cortázar y en Marechal. Arlt y Borges son los dos grandes escritores argentinos, y en algún sentido a partir de ellos se arman todas las genealogías, los parentescos y las intrigas de la literatura argentina contemporánea.⁴⁴

Although in his lecture 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' Borges is not specifically addressing the question of detective fiction, it is evident that such a notion might well be applicable to that genre, too. No wonder, then, that for Walsh, the figure of Isidro Parodi (1942) became the milestone for the *criollo* detective. Perhaps in the same manner Groussac and Holmberg did with regard to 'El candado de oro' and 'La bolsa de huesos' back in 1884 and 1896, Bustos Domecq, one of the pseudonyms adopted by Borges and Bioy Casares, simply appropriated the conventions of the typical whodunit in their satirical collection of stories. In this way, and at a distance, Bustos Domecq domesticated Poe's Dupin for local consumption. Most importantly, in the case of Isidro Parodi, they engaged in the ludic copycat of the locked room mystery with the twist of a contextual political comment,⁴⁵ not least in the fact that the detective himself is imprisoned in an entirely different, and political, locked-room of his own. In the case of Borges and Bioy Casares, their choice 'de un pretexto policíaco'⁴⁶ is induced by their championing of a certain aesthetic ideal which is linked to a literary tradition they

⁴⁴ See 'Entrevista: Ricardo Piglia', interview by Marithelma Costa, *Hispanamérica: Revista de Literatura* No. 15, 1986, p. 42. See also Jorge Fonet, "'Homenaje a Roberto Arlt': O, la literatura como plagio", *Nueva revista de filología hispánica*, No. 42, 1994, pp. 115-41; and Noé Jitrik, 'En las manos de Borges el corazón de Arlt: A propósito de *Nombre falso*, de Ricardo Piglia', in *Cambio* No. 3, 1976, pp. 85-91.

⁴⁵ *Seis problemas para Isidro Parodi* can be seen as a social critique of Juan Domingo Perón's government. Borges and Bioy Casares exploit parody and humour to allude in a covert manner to the new government and the social changes it imposed on the *oligarquía*. Noteworthy features of the Parodi series are cryptic references to class hostility and *populismo*, the philosophy and practice that followed Perón's first administration (1946-55). Authors such as Peyrou and Anderson Imbert also chose the whodunit school to voice veiled but not indecipherable anti-Peronist ideology.

⁴⁶ Héctor Ciocchini, 'Borges y el pretexto policíaco', (ed.), G. Rivera, J. L. Volta, *Los héroes "difíciles". Literatura policial en Argentina y en Italia* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1991), pp. 85-94.

understand as “ordered” (in opposition to the “chaos” of the Argentine tradition). By extension, off course, this is not only simply an intellectual excuse but also a ludic gesture. As Borges himself writes:

¿Qué podríamos decir como apología del género policial? Hay una que es muy evidente y cierta: nuestra literatura tiende a lo caótico. Se tiende al verso libre porque es más fácil que el verso regular; la verdad es que es muy difícil; Se tiende a suprimir los personajes, los argumentos, todo es muy vago. En esta época nuestra, tan caótica, hay algo que, humildemente, ha mantenido las virtudes clásicas: el cuento policial (...) Yo diría, para defender la novela policial, que no necesita defensa, leída con cierto desdén ahora, está salvando *el orden en una época de desorden*⁴⁷ (My italics).

Whether for the sake of exploiting the genre for satirical purposes, favouring an aesthetic ideal or playing cerebral games with his readership, Borges appropriated the characteristics of the whodunit and replicated them. Rud claims that the extent of the domestication exercised by Borges produces a new and original re-reading, ‘que surge como novedosa e iniciática’, compared to that of other authors circulating at the time such as Peyrou, Castellani, Pérez Zelaschi and Walsh. Yet, Arlt is no stranger to such manipulation of genres.⁴⁸ Rud explains that:

Si en ‘La muerte y la brújula’ habíamos visto a un detective (un funcionario estatal, es interesante notarlo) que se apropia de un modo intelectual para intentar resolver (fallidamente) una situación inédita, (entendido esto como restaurar, en alguna medida, la institucionalidad resquebrajada por el crimen). en *El juguete rabioso*, novela de Roberto Arlt publicada en 1926, en donde no podemos situar todavía una relación suficientemente estrecha con las pautas definitorias de lo policial (aunque la novela ponga en foco con fluida concentración otra variedad de literatura popular, como la novela de

⁴⁷ Jorge L. Borges, ‘El cuento policial’, *Borges oral* (1979), in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1996, volume IV).

⁴⁸ Arlt’s misappropriation of the conventions of melodrama for political purposes is discussed in Chapter 5.

aventuras), surge el gesto de ‘asalto literario’, en el ámbito de la materialidad más desnuda, provocando otro modo de la apropiación (podríamos decir incluso un modo casi opuesto a la opción intelectual): aquella escena tan estudiada de la novela, en la que Silvio Astier y sus socios saquean una biblioteca escolar, parece la instancia en que una literatura que se indaga a sí misma, a partir de un delito. Si Borges entendía la apropiación de los artificios y el empleo de la racionalidad detectivesca universal como un medio de activar el orden de la ‘ficción nacional’, se ponen aquí en escena las condiciones de lectura y producción, instancia paradigmática de desorden, en tanto crimen *per se*: se roban textos, y a la vez, el poder leer; Como ‘se escribe de donde se lee’, cuestión evidente en la producción arltiana, el robo constituye, entonces, la única instancia posible de una escritura propia, siendo en su forma y en su relación con la serie literaria, inevitablemente inapropiada.⁴⁹

Arlt also engages in such misappropriation.⁵⁰ Unlike Borges, though, Arlt manipulated the form not for the sake of the intellectual challenge or in support of a particular aesthetic cause but for the simple reason that, as a popular genre, detective fiction provided Arlt with yet another shape he could mould for his own ideological purposes. While Borges favoured the whodunit in the pursuit of a certain aesthetic ideal, Arlt’s particular twist was the exploitation of a popular genre for a political purpose. Arlt would incorporate a historical dimension within the detective story, one that reflected the socio-cultural background of his particular readership – one, indeed, which was perhaps largely at odds with Borges’ opposing upper-class vision.

As a result, it is not surprising that there has been a tendency amongst critics to dissociate Arlt from the *policial*.⁵¹ This is even less surprising perhaps in the light of

⁴⁹ Rud, ‘Breve historia de una apropiación. Apuntes para una aproximación al género policial en la Argentina’, published on <http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero17/apropia.html> (consulted 15 November 2005).

⁵⁰ Throughout his oeuvre, Arlt exploits popular genres, misappropriating them to mirror certain socio-cultural coordinates. See also Sylvia Saïtta, ‘Traiciones desviadas, ensoñaciones imposibles: los usos del folletín en Roberto Arlt’ in *Iberoamericana*, No. 74, (Hamburg, 1999), pp. 63-80.

⁵¹ Between the 1950s and 1970s the critical work on Arlt was roughly divided into three quite distinct areas. Firstly, Raúl Larra focused on trying to explain or justify the ambiguities and contradictions in Arlt’s work as a left-wing intellectual without harming his credibility as a writer (See *Roberto Arlt el*

the fact that Arlt's career as a reader and writer always involves a certain illegitimacy.⁵² This cultural appropriation, or 'cultural bricolage' as defined by Nelle in the case of Arlt,⁵³ the practice of making use of certain literary models, has been a tradition exploited just as much by highbrow authors such as Borges by marginal writers such as Arlt. In this respect, there are two important issues to bear in mind when looking at Arlt's oeuvre. The first is the fact that Arlt was a product of his eclectic reading and cultural heteroglossia.⁵⁴ As such, Arlt the reader⁵⁵ and the writer could represent the "earnest minority", that thriving social group of the early 1920s.⁵⁶ In this respect, that same thriving social group constitutes, without a doubt, a new readership who, disobedient to or ignorant of the canon, would equally find nourishment in bad translations of popular authors like Carolina Invernizzi, Emilio Salgari, Edgar Allan Poe, serial novels such as Ponson du Terrail's *Rocamboles*, religious texts or D.I.Y. mechanic manuals alongside authoritative names such as Cervantes, Borges, Baroja,

torturado, 1952). With his *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* (1965), Oscar Masotta read Arlt's work in the light of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre's *Saint Genet*. Finally, Diana Guerrero's *Roberto Arlt, el habitante solitario* (1972) aimed at unveiling the ideological meaning of Arlt's literary discourse and the construction of class consciousness of the *porteño* petty bourgeoisie of the 1920s and 1930s.

⁵² In Chapters 2 and 3 we discuss the illegitimate appropriation of cultural capital in relation to Arlt himself and his protagonist in *El juguete rabioso*. Silvio and his peers, a gang of petty criminals, would only be, if ever, passive subjects to the canonical school. Their access to 'culture' has been blocked, or, better still, dosed in quantity and quality by the system aiming to integrate them, to tame them, to fit them into it. Silvio will have to pay to access his first 'literature', his appropriation of 'dubious' cultural capital also being illegitimate. Significantly, one of the most challenging 'jobs' Silvio's gang carries out is the looting of a school library, the booty carried away assessed by its sales value. This reinforces the idea that Silvio's access to cultural capital is not only unlawful but also illegitimate.

⁵³ See Chapter 5.

⁵⁴ See Chapters 2 and 3. Furthermore, Ricardo Piglia points out the relationship in Arlt between 'read crime' and 'real crime', especially in relation to protagonist-narrator Remo Erdosain in *Los siete locos*. Particularly important is Piglia's notion of 'quijotismo negativo'; the fact that reading for Arlt, as for his characters, always seems to have a negative, disturbing and crime-inducing effect. See Ricardo Piglia, *Crítica y ficción* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001), p 24.

⁵⁵ It is common knowledge that Arlt was, from a very young age, a most fervent, passionate reader. Arlt's reading background would be a recurrent feature in most of his narrative oeuvre not only as it would be reflected in his main characters (Silvio Astier in *El juguete rabioso* epitomises this) but also in his *Aguafuertes*. In 'Las ciencias ocultas de Buenos Aires' Arlt pays homage to Baudelaire (See *Obras completas*: I, 531). Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that in his *Las aguafuertes porteñas de Roberto Arlt*: Buenos Aires (Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1981) Daniel C. Scroggins finds 'veintiocho escritores franceses, cuatro rusos, veinte españoles, diez ingleses, cinco italianos, siete estadounidenses, trece hispanoamericanos no argentinos, cuarenta y cinco argentinos y algunos portugueses, alemanes y orientales' (1981, p.18); and all these writers only featured in the *Aguafuertes* written between 1928 and 1933.

⁵⁶ See Hoggart, 260 and Chapter 1.

Baudelaire, Shakespeare or Dostoevsky.⁵⁷ On the other hand, and equally important, is the fact that Arlt's journalistic writing was perhaps the genre the *porteño* writer cultivated most consistently. Generally speaking, the critics' association of Arlt with newspaper and magazine publications has mainly been due to Arlt's journalistic career and particularly the publication of his *Aguafuertes*; Arlt's only other relationship with the detective genre is a mere biographical note of his brief experience in 1927 as a *cronista policial* (crime journalist) for the newspaper *Crónica*.⁵⁸ In this respect, from 1925 – the year the Haynes publishing house launched its weekly (every Tuesday) miscellaneous magazine *Don Goyo*⁵⁹ – the director (and personal friend), Conrado Nalé Roxlo, gave Arlt his first stable, paid job in journalism. Actually, his columns and contributions to magazines were Arlt's one and only reliable source of income.⁶⁰ Significantly, the Haynes group was founded in 1918 by the British Alberto Haynes who had gone to Buenos Aires to work in the rail industry. This is the same publishing house that published the magazines *El Hogar* (1904) and *Mundo Argentino* (January 1911), both of which regularly published columns and short stories by Arlt.

As Lafforgue and Rivera point out, despite this relative lack of a concrete link between Arlt's stories and the detective genre, some critics such as Masotta, Guerrero and Piglia do recognise and elaborate on certain recurrent topics of criminal behaviour present in Arlt's oeuvre such as robbery, denunciation, kidnapping, conspiracy, prostitution and murder which are also typically present in hard-boiled productions.⁶¹ In 1984, however, Omar Borré edited *Estoy cargada de muerte*, a selection of fourteen stories published between 1926 and 1939. This rather atypical selection – none of the

⁵⁷ For an account of the mutual influence of highbrow and popular culture, see Chartier, *Libros, lecturas y lectores en la Edad Moderna*, (tran.) Mario Armiño (Barcelona: Alianza, 1993).

⁵⁸ The importance of this biographical note only became apparent much later. In it, Arlt confesses that several of his later pieces were inspired by real crimes he had to report on his days at *Crónica*: perhaps the best known of these is the 1932 play *300 millones*.

⁵⁹ Following the *Caras y Caretas* model, *Don Goyo* was launched in 1925 by Alberto Haynes and was directed by Conrado Nalé Roxlo. The magazine only lasted three years.

⁶⁰ See Saítta, 2000, p. 37.

⁶¹ Lafforgue and Rivera, 1996, p. 140.

tales included in this volume were included in the more canonical selection of nine tales compiled in *El jorobadito* (1933) – hints at Borré’s intention to broaden Arlt’s status to embrace the detective fiction genre. Such an intention was indeed confirmed a decade later by Borré himself when he edited a second collection of crime-related stories in 1994. In *El crimen casi perfercto*,⁶² named after the title-story, Borré selected a number of tales published by Arlt in *Mundo Argentino* and *El Hogar* between 1937 and 1942. Similarly, the Uruguayan critic Pablo Rocca analysed Arlt’s alignment with the classic whodunit model in his *Un Argentino entre gangsters* which, with the exception of ‘El bastón de la muerte’, is a re-edition of Borré’s 1994 compilation.⁶³

III. The evidence

It is generally said that a good crime writer is best remembered for his or her detective. As Binyon points out in *Murder Will Out*, this phenomenon is perhaps restricted to detective fiction “not only because, uniquely, the genre grew out of the character but also because, again uniquely, the character has so often overshadowed

⁶² This is one of the titles published in ‘La Muerte y la Brújula’ collection by Clarín/Aguilar in 1994.

⁶³ All citations and references will be to *Roberto Arlt, Cuentos completos*, (ed.) Ricardo Piglia and Omar Borré (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe, 1996). This edition of *Cuentos completos* contains 72 short stories written between 1925 (when Arlt published his first short story, ‘El gato cocido’) and 1942 (when the last story, ‘Los esbirros de Venecia’, appeared). This edition contains 42 stories more than the 1981 *Obras completas* with a foreword by Julio Cortázar. The 28 stories that have not so far been included in any of the collection of stories were originally published in *El Hogar* and *Mundo Argentino*. No new stories have come to light since Arlt’s death. During his lifetime Arlt published in both newspapers and the weekly and monthly magazines mentioned above, as well as in *La Nación*, *Don Goyo* and *El Mundo*. Often under considerable time constraints, Arlt sometimes modified the stories and changed the titles in order to pass them off as completely fresh material in other newspapers. ‘El gato cocido’, for instance, was published earlier as ‘La tía Pepa’. The same happened with short stories such as ‘Las fieras’, ‘Noche terrible’, ‘El traje del fantasma’. ‘Un viaje terrible’ had two previous versions: ‘¡SOS! Longitud 145° 30’, Latitud 29° 15’ ’ and ‘Prohibido ser adivino en este barco’. Amongst the short stories Arlt published between 1925 and 1942, some of them could be included under the heading of detective stories. There are also various tales, particularly those penned after Arlt visited Morocco and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which have elements of the spy story or fairy tale complete with a strong flavour of the orient. Amongst the latter there are several which seem to follow the *Arabian Nights* pattern: someone is detained after apparently committing a crime or doing something strange and is only able to prove their innocence by revealing the various misadventures which landed them in their present predicament. (Stevenson and Chesterton, off course, provide clear models for this kind of fiction which might be described as Arabian fantasies.) Other stories, of a less orientalized nature, likewise feature spies, double agents and betrayal. Most of these are set in Europe. Perhaps the cinema was the main model here since Arlt later wrote occasional film reviews.

and become detached from the author. More people know of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot than of Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie.”⁶⁴ In the present case, unlike other Argentine writers whose contribution to the genre has been noted, Arlt does not develop a sleuth who appears regularly in his tales.⁶⁵ This might in itself be yet another reason why commentators have failed to associate Arlt with detective fiction. Despite the lack of a trade mark detective, however, what we do find is that Arlt achieves a recurrent tone, attitude, set of values and class consciousness that could be aligned with either of the two major detective fiction schools at different moments.

By two major schools we refer, of course, to the standard division of the genre into the British whodunit and the American hard-boiled traditions as represented by Christie and Chandler respectively. In essence, this approach views the genre as evolving as a result of shifts of impetus between England, France, and North America. Although not intended as a detective story, William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794) is nonetheless recognised as a ‘remarkable novel of criminal detection and pursuit’⁶⁶ which proved seminal to the development of the detective story for three reasons. Firstly, because Godwin’s method of construction inspired Poe (and ultimately constitutes the basis of the achievement of Gaboriau and Conan Doyle). Poe was clearly aware of Godwin’s inverted method of composition since he mentions it in passing in his 1846 essay *The Philosophy of Composition*. Secondly, Godwin focuses on attracting the reader’s attention to the adventure and pursuit side of the story. And, thirdly, Godwin made the reader sympathise with the persecutor as well as the victim.

⁶⁴ T. J. Binyon, *Murder Will Out. The Detective in Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 1. The main theme of Binyon’s study is the overarching importance of the central character in the development of the genre.

⁶⁵ Other national authors, however, did develop a recognizable detective whose adventures refract local cultural and ideological conventions. Borges and Bioy Casares did so, for example, with Isidro Parodi. Another example is provided by Eduardo Castellani (1899-1981), who follows in the tradition of G. K. Chesterton’s clerical detective series featuring Father Brown. Castellani’s *Padre Metri* (1938) and, two decades later, *Padre Ducadelia* stories (1959), both concern maverick priest-detectives and both operate mainly in the province of Chaco in the North of Argentina.

⁶⁶ See Hale, *Great French Detective Stories* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1984), p. 9.

It was Poe, however, who established the main conventions of the detective story in the West. Of the five key stories penned between 1840 and 1845, the three most important – ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, ‘The Mystery of Marie Roget’ and ‘The Purloined Letter’ – feature the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin and are set in Paris. (The other two, ‘The Gold-Bug’ and ‘Thou Art the Man’, were influential for other reasons.) Poe’s achievement was manifold. Not only did he delineate the character of his detective but he also allowed for the evolution of the plot through his device of the ‘impossible crime’ (notably, off course, the locked-room mystery which, by the 1930s, in the hands of an author such as John Dickson Carr, had virtually become a genre in its own right). By setting his stories in Paris, Poe also established the symbolic meaning of a city as a labyrinth. Finally, Poe was the forerunner of the ‘detective duo’ formula, involving as it does the teaming up of the omniscient detective with his more dull-witted amanuensis. Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson are but one example of such a pairing which, until the advent of the American hard-boiled, dominated crime writing.⁶⁷

The general influence of Poe on Arlt’s detective tales is undeniable. In ‘El jorobadito’ (1928),⁶⁸ for example, the main protagonist, by now safely ensconced in prison, recounts how he killed a friend, a hunchback named Rigoletto, at the house of a certain Mrs X. Though the story is relatively straightforward, it contains many of the elements associated with Poe’s style of North American Gothic. The protagonist is keen to stress that he is not mentally deranged (though in so doing he only seems to confirm the reader’s suspicion that he is psychotic), suggesting that the crime was the result of a

⁶⁷ The evolution of detective fiction from Eugène-François Vidocq’s (1775-1857) 1828 *Mémoires* need not concern us here, though it is worth mentioning that Vidocq’s choice of the city and its less privileged denizens as his main theme establishes a link between the urban setting, poverty and crime writing which, a century later, is replicated by Arlt within the context of Buenos Aires. For a useful overview of the genre, particularly of the bi-partite division of the detective story, see: Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From Detective Story to the crime Novel* (New York: Viking, rev. 1995).

⁶⁸ ‘El jorobadito’ [The Hunchback] was published twice in *El Mundo* as ‘El insolente jorobadito’, 9 and 15 May (illustrated by Julio Payró), 1928; *El jorobadito* (Buenos Aires: Anaconda, 1933); *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Carlos Lohlé, 2 vols., 1981; prologue by Julio Cortázar); 2nd edition, Buenos Aires: Planeta - Carlos Lohlé, 3 vols., 1991).

long concealed hatred (i.e. introducing the notion of a revenge motive). Not only that but the infirmity of the hunchback (an infirmity perhaps suggestive of excessive sexual potency, at least if we are to introduce a Freudian element, but also serving to further emphasise the dead man's status as victim) introduces a further macabre note. Finally, the confessional element, again a recurrent device employed by Poe, also necessitates a regression from effect to cause.⁶⁹

In 'El resorte secreto' (1937),⁷⁰ the debt to Poe is even more manifest, this time the model being 'The Tell-tale Heart.' As in 'El jorobadito', the story assumes the confessional form since it involves Albertina Halbert's account of how she killed her wicked aunt in order to avenge the miserable years she had spent in her care. Without either regret or guilt, killing Aunt Eugenia is for Albertina a 'natural choice'. After Albertina's mother had died when she was ten, Eugenia becomes increasingly mean and merciless to her and her father. After the death of Albertina's father, her inheritance is left in the hands of Eugenia who promptly withdraws her from school and treats her like a maid. Humiliated but patient, Albertina puts up with her aunt's abuse until Eugenia decides to build a house in a plot of land she owns next door (with Albertina's inheritance). Eugenia is too tight-fisted to pay for a nightwatchman to guard the building materials. One stormy night, Albertina is awoken by Eugenia who tells her to cover some bags of lime left by the workers before it starts to rain. Albertina grabs her chance of killing Eugenia when the latter accompanies her to the site. There is a large hole (half-filled with quicklime) in the ground for the pillars of the house. As they walk past it with some heavy sheets of metal to cover the lime, Albertina pushes Eugenia in the hole before going back to bed. The following day, the police inform her of her aunt's 'accident'. Albertina plays the role of the sad, shocked niece with conviction and, entirely unsuspected of the crime, pleads with the judge to be allowed to return to

⁶⁹ Ernesto Sábato's renowned novel *El túnel* (1948) also follows this same dynamic.

⁷⁰ 'El resorte secreto' ([The Secret Means] p. 327) was published in *El Hogar*, 3 September 1937.

school. Here again we find Arlt playing an arpeggio on Poe's favoured theme of abnormal psychology, though the tale's ruthless insistence on the brutality of a crime committed by a schoolgirl (thus undermining our conventional notion of schoolgirl innocence) seems surprisingly modern.

Finally, in 'La venganza del mono' (1937),⁷¹ Arlt provides us with a post-Darwinian rewriting of Poe's pre-Darwinian 'Murders in the Rue Morgue.' In this tale. Antonio Fligtebaud, a serial killer whose physiognomy deliberately fails to conform to that of a criminal, is a patient, clever, cowardly and very well-mannered murderer. These dandyish details are, of course, important in light of the psychological significance of a role in which conspicuous consumption and behavioural patterns only serve to mask economic emasculation and lack of status. After each murder Fligtebaud admits himself to a sanatorium to be treated of an imaginary ailment (thus, introducing a further layer of psychological failure). His third victim is an old usurer who lives on his own with his pet, a monkey, in the second-hand clothes shop he owns. Fligtebaud watches him from an abandoned loft at the other side of the street and eventually shoots him through the window. Having taken the precaution to glue smaller sized soles to his shoes than his real ones, Fligtebaud intentionally leaves his footprints in a dusty corner and proceeds to loot the safe. He feels watched: the monkey is there. The monkey steals Fligtebaud's top hat, which as it is tailor-made still has his initials on it. The monkey runs off engaging Fligtebaud in a chase over the roofs of Buenos Aires. Every time he is about to catch the animal, the swift monkey runs off. Suddenly, the monkey stops, leaves the hat and disappears into the night. Fligtebaud cannot believe his luck and makes a dash for it. At that moment, he feels glass under his legs: the monkey had left the top hat on a skylight. The following day, newspapers announce the search for an accomplice who, after the burglary, had killed Fligtebaud. In Poe's story, the orang-

⁷¹ 'La venganza del mono' ([The Revenge of the Monkey] p. 278) was published in *El Hogar*, 7 May 1937 and in *El crimen casi perfecto* (1994).

utan that commits the murder of the two women in the rue Morgue represents the violent, uncontrollable force of nature; Arlt's monkey, on the other hand, assumes the role of a hidden avenger. Yet again the focus is on the abnormal psychology of the human agent. This story, however, exemplifies the manner in which South American writers manipulate generic conventions for their own purposes. Horacio Quiroga published a collection of stories about talking animals (*Cuentos de la selva*) in 1918. Though intended for children, and perhaps modeled on Kipling, it introduces a strain of anthropomorphism into Argentine fiction which was later imitated by other writers, notably Lugones.

More generally, Arlt's detective stories range from texts which approximate to the *whodunit* at one end of the spectrum to the hard-boiled school at the other end. Indeed, some of Arlt's detective figures, or those acting in the capacity of volunteer (i.e. accidental or self-appointed) detective, duplicate the roles of the more renowned figures of the genre: Dupin (Poe), Holmes (Conan Doyle), Marlowe (Chandler), and even, on occasion, Maigret (Simenon).⁷² Arlt's *literatura policial*, however, represents not only an innocuous form of entertainment but also a vehicle for social protest, an instrument of ideological persuasion and a framework within which to debate social and ethical problems. Indeed, it could be argued that a close reading of Arlt's stories could provide the basis of a social history of the period. Naturally, this occurs within the conventionalised rules of the genre. One of the conventions of the whodunit, the inverted nature of the writing process, we have already mentioned: "[t]his process of regression from effect to cause, from solution to problem' which 'lies at the very heart of detective fiction."⁷³ W. H. Auden usefully added a further, essentially theocratic, dimension in his definition of the genre. For Auden, though the detective story looks

⁷² Belgian Georges Simenon (born in 1903) launches his Maigret series in 1931 and after a prolific career only gives up writing in 1971 having penned about eighty of the Maigret stories. Considered a *feuilletoniste*, Simenon turned Maigret into the most celebrated occupant of the Police Judiciaire, which was formerly the Préfecture where Vidocq's Brigade of the Sûreté would report.

⁷³ Hale, 1984, p. 15.

straightforward – “a murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murder is arrested or dies”⁷⁴ – the genre is more purposive than this simple formula would suggest: a crime has ruptured the normal social tranquillity of the group in which it occurs, and the ultimate aim of the genre is an account of the restoration of peace, whether it be by coincidence, chance or by means of somebody’s licit or illicit intervention, such that the world regains its *status quo ante*.

How do these generic conventions accord with Arlt’s work? Let us begin by examining ‘Un error judicial’.⁷⁵ In this story, Mrs Grummer, a 62 year-old woman, is accused of robbing Mr Rumpler’s safe. Her late employer’s relatives find her even less to their liking when they learn that according to Mr Rumpler’s will the greater part of his estate also goes to her (they had been working together for more than twenty years). Motivated by personal interest (he hopes to borrow some more money from his aunt), Rumpler’s nephew, Ernesto Goice, volunteers to investigate the matter. In this respect, the story is less a *whodunit* than a *howdunit* in the sense that the reader’s attention is directed at the question of how the crime was committed rather than who perpetrated it. Indeed, the main plotline concentrates on the manner in which Mr Roeder has managed to implicate Mrs Grummer. Although Arlt’s volunteer detective exhibits none of the eccentric brilliance of the famous detectives of fiction, Arlt nonetheless obliquely pays tribute to both Dupin and Holmes. In short, Goice puts an advertisement in a Stock Market newspaper asking for any information on shares bought on behalf of Mr Roeder. Significantly, Arlt uses a device, the insertion of a newspaper advertisement,

⁷⁴ Auden, 1963, p. 400.

⁷⁵ ‘Un error judicial’ [A Judicial Mistake] was first published in *Mundo Argentino*, 22 November 1927. Later, it was included in “*Estoy cargada de muerte*” y otros borradores. (ed.) Omar Borré, (Buenos Aires 1984). In ‘Un error judicial’, Mr Roeder, the keys keeper, accuses Mrs Grummer. Everything points at her: she has got some money in the bank (lottery money she had lent her nephew and has just got back), some pages in the balance books are crossed out, some others are missing and she is too upset to remember the details that could account for such irregularities. Ernesto Goice knows her aunt is innocent and suspects Mr Roeder. Goice is sure it was Mr Roeder who had torn out the pages in the book and he will prove it.

first employed in Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (*Graham's Magazine*, April 1841) and subsequently recycled many times in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Needless to say, by the end of the story, the real murderer has been identified by Goice, who reveals by means of a logical chain of deductions how he arrived at this conclusion (Roeder not only killed Rimpler but also altered the books to implicate Mrs Grummer). Once the culprit has been apprehended, Mrs Grummer and her volunteer detective return to their former simple and honest lives.

The appearance of a corpse, an amateur detective and the 'fair-play' of the detection procedure aligns this story with the Golden Age tradition.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, a socio-cultural relocation has taken place. It appears as if Arlt managed to reroute a genre so often associated with the preferred reading choice of the Argentine educated classes by means of accommodating the type of crime to a different social stratum. This is particularly clear by the amount of money and social prestige on the line. Thus, Arlt turns this 'howdunit' into a story socio-culturally fit for his lower middle/ upper working class readership.

The fact that Arlt chooses a newspaper as a means to catch the culprit implies not only that he might be replicating Poe's plot device, later also used by Conan Doyle, but perhaps more importantly, it shows the magnitude of the press, popular or otherwise, at that historical juncture and the power it exercised by means of its

⁷⁶ The Golden Age of detective fiction is mainly associated with the English authors who thrived between the Wars. Amongst the most significant names of the 1920s we find Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham. Other authors, largely forgotten today except among connoisseurs of the genre, include: H. C. Bailey, Anthony Berkeley (who also wrote under the pen name Francis Iles), Freeman Wills Crofts, Patricia Wentworth, Josephine Tey, Philip MacDonald and Henry Wade. The 1930s witnessed the emergence of authors such as John Dickson Carr (who also wrote under his pseudonym of Carter Dickson), Michael Innes, Ngaio Marsh and Nicholas Blake (the pseudonym under which C. Day Lewis wrote crime fiction). Though clearly perceived as a form of entertainment, Golden Age detective fiction had the reputation of being cerebral, stringent and demanding in the manner of other semi-serious intellectual pursuits of the period such as the crossword puzzle and the jigsaw. It was presumably this semi-intellectual status that allowed for its widespread adoption by the middle class. In any event, the *whodunit* clearly distanced itself from the more popular 'shocker' or 'thriller' tradition which, presumably, derives from the Victorian 'shilling shocker' (a form which has still not received the scholarly examination that it deserves). This semi-intellectual puzzle element was clearly of primary interest to Borges and Bioy Casares and is reflected in the choice of titles they included in their *Séptimo círculo* collection. Middle-brow and low-brow titles, however, tend to be merged indiscriminately in other collections elsewhere which depended primarily on translation (e.g. the French 'le Masque' series or the Italian *giallo*).

readership.⁷⁷ ‘La venganza del mono’ and ‘La pista de los dientes de oro’ also feature newspapers as a means of mediating between the police and the readership, helping thereby to expose or catch the criminal. Of course, newspapers also constituted a source of inspiration for Arlt,⁷⁸ independent of the role they played with regard to his financial support, though it is telling that all of Arlt short stories without exception were first published in newspapers or magazines. These include weekly and monthly magazines such as *El Hogar*, *Mundo Argentino* and *Don Goyo* as well as newspapers such as *El Mundo* and the more established *La Nación*.

In fact, for a writer such as Arlt, one who is contriving to make a living by means of appropriating popular genres, the periodical press provides a perfect medium for his work. In many respects Arlt’s literary career was not unlike that of the typical British Victorian man of letters (George R. Sims, is a good example) capable of turning his hand to journalism, the novel, genre fiction (such as the detective story and proto science-fiction), or the theatre. Indeed, it is crucial to remember that Roberto Arlt’s career is really forged by means of his relationships with various newspapers. Take Arlt’s prolific short story output, for example. Of the seventy-two tales compiled in *Cuentos completos* by Piglia and Borré (1996)⁷⁹ all were first published in newspapers and magazines, mainly in *El Hogar* and *Mundo Argentino*, edited by Haynes, the same publishing house as *El Mundo* newspaper. Despite the fact that from 1932 Arlt’s career

⁷⁷ This is an implication that also reflects Poe’s and Conan Doyle’s press readership. On the other hand, at the turn of the twentieth century, Argentina was amongst the best educated countries in the Americas with literacy levels at top end of the list. With the new constitution of 1853, Argentina embarked on a process of development and modernization. Not only was it a thriving nation, with the excellent trade links with Europe and a large scale railway system but the national education system was also amongst the best. Twice president Julio Argentino Roca (1880-1886 and 1898-1904) promoted and sanctioned the Ley 1420 de Educación Común. This law, which assured citizens access to compulsory, free education (independent of religious control) until the age of fifteen, was finally passed in 1884, after heated Parliamentary argument between Catholics and liberals, only twelve years after similar legislation was implemented in Britain. In ‘Inventing the City’ we address the social and cultural implications of the rise of a new readership reflected by the newspaper and magazine proliferation in further detail (see Chapter 1).

⁷⁸ For an account of Arlt’s drawing plotlines from his years as a crime report writer, see Chapter 5. In addition, newspapers are also very important in approaching Arlt’s first novels, see also Chapter 2.

⁷⁹ (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe Argentina S. A/ Seix Barral, 1996), p. 615.

seems to switch from narrative fiction to the theatre, not only does he still publish short stories on a regular basis in those magazines but he also contributed to more highbrow newspapers like *La Nación*. Equally important is his newspaper column production. Arlt carries on adding to his regular *Aguafuertes* column not only from Chile, Uruguay, Brazil and later Spain,⁸⁰ but also by means of his traditional *Aguafuertes porteñas*⁸¹ which has, by this time, become almost an institution in the *El Mundo*.

With its massive print run, *El Mundo* targetted the petty bourgeoisie.⁸² This daily paper, published for the first time on 14 May 1928, promoted itself as “diario moderno, cómodo y sintético” ideal to be read on the bus, the tram or during a break at work.⁸³ As we have noted before, it was Arlt’s only regular source of income. Together with *Crónica* (where Arlt began his journalistic career writing *crónicas policiales* in 1927), *El Mundo* competed with the other two important, most established newspapers, *La Nación* and *La Prensa*. As he points out in his ‘La crónica 231’ (1929), Arlt is both pleased and proud to write for a more popular newspaper such as *El Mundo*.

⁸⁰Just as he did with the *aguafuertes* in Buenos Aires, Arlt carried on chronicling his everyday impressions of the countries he visited. See *Aguafuertes Uruguayas* (Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 1996); *Tratado de delincuencia. Aguafuertes inéditas* (Buenos Aires: La Página, 1996; edited by Saítta); *En el país del viento. Viaje a la Patagonia (1934)* (Buenos Aires: Simurg, 1997; edited by Saítta); *Aguafuertes gallegas* (Rosario: Ameghino, 1997; edited by Rodolfo Alonso; also published in A Coruña: Edición do Castro, 1997); *Aguafuertes* (Buenos Aires/Barcelona: Losada, 1998; prologue by David Viñas); includes all ‘aguafuertes porteñas’ published before by Losada; *Aguafuertes porteñas*, 1958; *Nuevas aguafuertes*, 1975; *Aguafuertes porteñas: vida cotidiana*, 1993 (edited by Saítta); *Aguafuertes porteñas: cultura y política*, 1940 (edited by Saítta). This volume also includes a selection of *Aguafuertes gallegas y asturianas*, 1999, edited by Saítta and some other ‘aguafuertes españolas’); *Aguafuertes gallegas y asturianas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1999; edited by Saítta); *Aguafuertes madrileñas. Presagios de una guerra civil* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 2000; edited by Saítta).

⁸¹ According to the theme the name of this column would vary from ‘porteñas’ to ‘teatrales’ or even ‘fluviales’, which Arlt wrote during a voyage on his friend Rodolfo Aebi’s boat during August 1930. *El Mundo* also published his ‘Aguafuertes patagónicas’ (January and February 1934) when Arlt spent two months travelling in the South of Argentina; ‘El infierno santiagueño’ from a poor village in the province of Santiago del Estero (January 1937); ‘Hospitales en la miseria’ later called ‘Problemas hospitalarios’, a series on hospitals public health issues (January and February 1933, and later in August 1939); in series such as ‘La ciudad se queja’ and ‘Buenos Aires se queja’ Arlt denounces various municipal issues and problems that affect the urban plan of the city (these run from March to July 1930). Later on, on 8 April 1935, he sends regular *aguafuertes* from various cities in all Canary Islands, Andalucía, Galicia, Asturias, the Basque country as well as from Madrid, Barcelona and Tangier (August 1935). His last trip would be a visit to Chile in January 1941 from whence he contributed a few columns under the title of ‘Cartas de Chile’.

⁸² Notice that Arlt became involved with *El Mundo* virtually from the outset: the first *Aguafuerte porteña* came out on 6 August 1928.

⁸³ See ‘La crónica 231’ in *Aguafuertes porteñas* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1994), pp. 28-29.

Moving on to other examples, in tales such as ‘El crimen casi perfecto’ and ‘El incendiario’⁸⁴ Arlt employs the conventions of Poe’s locked-room mystery, though the stories are relocated to a national setting. In both we see the detective character attempting to solve rationally the puzzles by which various criminals defy them. The superior intelligence of these sleuths, who can see beyond events that seem to everybody else to be mere coincidences, shows again the disciplined and well-ordered inductive-deductive method epitomised by Dupin and Holmes. Indeed, these *cuentos* are told in such a manner that readers identify themselves with the detective figure whose intellectual supremacy triumphs, thus restoring peace to society. In ‘El crimen casi perfecto’ we are presented with the corpse of Mrs Stevens, a healthy 68 year-old found dead the morning after her birthday. The alibis of Mrs Stevens’ three brothers, Juan, Esteban and Pablo, are confirmed by the maid and the porter who brings her the evening newspaper at 7:10 and who also corroborates the fact that Mrs Stevens had not received any visitors. According to the evidence, after the maid left, Mrs Stevens checked her domestic accounts (the books were found on the table) before killing herself by drinking a glass of whisky laced with potassium cyanide. The front door was, of course, locked from the inside (the hermetically sealed apartment is one of the conventions of the impossible crime story that derives from Poe) and nobody entered or left the building after the maid retired the previous evening. Despite all this evidence, the detective in charge of the case refuses to accept the suicide hypothesis. To begin with, the police are unable to find the container for the cyanide. Secondly, Mrs Stevens was not only healthy but, more importantly, was not the type to commit suicide. Thirdly, there is a motive for her murder: Mrs Stevens’ brothers are three opportunistic rascals who would benefit from her estate after her death. This is indeed an intellectual duel with the criminal:

⁸⁴ ‘El crimen casi perfecto’ ([The Almost Perfect Crime], 1996: 543) was published in *Mundo Argentino*, 29 May 1940 and in *El crimen* (1994); ‘El incendiario’ ([The Arsonist], 1996: 264) comes out in *Mundo Argentino*, 9 April 1937.

Eché a caminar sin prisa. El “suicidio” de la señora Stevens me preocupaba (diré una enormidad) no policialmente, sino deportivamente. Yo estaba en presencia de un asesino sagacísimo, posiblemente uno de los tres hermanos que había utilizado un recurso simple y complicado, pero imposible de presumir en la nitidez de aquel vacío.⁸⁵

Emulating Maigret’s method of soaking up not only the surroundings but the atmosphere of the crime scene, the officer, whose thoughts are absorbed in the elucidate of this mystery, goes for a walk before entering a nearby bar where he orders a whisky.⁸⁶ He stays there, pensive, looking around, the glass, the water, the ice cubes... Suddenly, he dashes out. The maid confirms the fact that Mrs. Stevens usually took her whisky with ice and that Pablo had been asked to examine the faulty fridge the week before. When they go to arrest Pablo, the brother who had planted the cyanide in the ice tray, he is so scared at the sight of the police that he suffers a heart attack and dies on the spot; justice is done and peace is restored.

In ‘El incendiario’ fate does not intervene as dramatically as in ‘El crimen casi perfecto’. Set in La Plata between 1936 and 1937, a stranger walks into a shop with an unusual proposition: he claims he can cause the premises to burn down. In return, he asks for only 10% of the insurance payout. The shop owner, though surprised at such an offer, agrees. At the general meeting of the Compañía de Seguros Intercontinental suspicions begin to surface when they are requested to pay out following three suspicious fires. Though they honour the terms of their contracts, the company are convinced the fires did not start by accident, though they are unable to prove otherwise. The manager of the statistics department, Calixto Laguardia, a rational and observant

⁸⁵ Arlt, 1996, p. 546.

⁸⁶ See Patrick Marnham, *The Man Who Wasn't Maigret. A Portrait of George Simenon* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992).

man, picks on certain recurrent features of the so-called accidents.⁸⁷ Advised by Laguardia, the owners of the insurance company decide to call in the police who will arrest the first owner of a factory reporting a fire following heavy rain. When they receive a report of a fire and arrest the owner, Mr Louis of the insurance company interrogates him as to the address of the man who installed the skylight on the roof. The man they want is a Mr Gunther, who runs a workshop making windows.⁸⁸ In the manner of Poirot, the means by which the crime has been committed is painstakingly revealed by Mr Laguardia as they drive to the workshop. Here Arlt seems to be transgressing the Anglo-Saxon model as the criminal escapes the police before they get there. Laguardia assures the inspector that although the fires may happen again, the company will include a clause in their contracts concerning skylights. Thus, Arlt legitimises his text within the classic tradition as it is clear from the ending that the criminal will not triumph over the good faith of the people and the rules of society as the police will be waiting for him to strike again. In this piece, Arlt chooses the classic formula as described by Simpson; beginning with an unsolved crime, moving towards the elucidation of the mystery, the author concentrates on the investigation and we finally arrive at the final solution which corresponds to an allegorical representation of the stability and continuity of the status quo.⁸⁹

Yet, when the crime is not solved by the institutional administration of justice, divine intervention, fate and sometimes even self-dispensed ‘social justice’ mediate to restore such stability. Such is the case of tales like ‘La venganza del mono’ for instance, where the ape’s intelligence outshines that of the murderer who, after chasing the animal over the dark rooftops of a dark Buenos Aires, is tricked into standing on a glass

⁸⁷ The similarities are thus; none of the businesses had electrical installations, all had very good security; all fires started in a second storey, never ground floor; they all started between 11:30am and 12:30pm; they all came after a rainy season.

⁸⁸ The brand of the windows installed by Mr Gunther is ‘vitalux’, most surely alluding to the trade mark ‘vitrolux’. This could be read as a further exophoric cultural reference as the brand would have been recognised by Arlt’s readership as a reliable trade mark.

⁸⁹ Simpson, pp. 10-11.

roof. The astute chimp makes the criminal's death look like an accident, thus avenging the murder of his master. Punishment by murder in the search for justice is also one of Arlt's ways of resolving conflict, particularly when the murderer is the victim of another type of crime, and especially if this is a case of social injustice or exploitation. In this kind of self-procured compensation, justifiable in a melodramatic and comic kind of way (which precisely makes the tale humoristic), we witness with pleasure how the killer-victim gets rid of his or her oppressor. Their name is cleared and more importantly, their peaceful life is restored, the police never becoming involved with their crime. Such is the case of both 'El resorte secreto' and 'El misterio de los tres sobretodos' to name two. 'El misterio de los tres sobretodos' ([The Mystery of the Three Coats])⁹⁰ in particular, proves a very good example of Arlt's domestication of conventions for a socio-cultural purpose. This tale reflects the noble, hardworking and honest spirit of the working class protagonist hoping to move up the social/work ladder by means of education and discipline. Equally, the pettiness of the crimes committed mirrors the social scope of the tale. As the author claims in the story, this "‘el enigma de la oficina’ fue uno de los tantos dramas oscuros que se gestan en las entrañas de las grandes ciudades...”.⁹¹

This tale is set in Casa Xenius, a small clothing store, where a number of items start disappearing inexplicably. First, a belt, a few pesos from a drawer and some material vanish into thin air. Then, it is twenty hats and later three coats, all of which brings anxiety to the whole department store as every member of staff becomes a suspect in the eyes of the grudging boss. The fact that, of course, all members of the staff have to chip in to pay for the cost of whatever item gets stolen reflects a

⁹⁰ Arlt, 1996, p. 336; first published in *El Hogar*, 19 November 1937 and later in *El crimen* (1994).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

stereotypical stinginess associated particularly with immigrant shop owners.⁹² The use of both parody and the typical detective strategy of withholding information creates the desirable suspense effect of the genre. Exploiting the formula of the locked-room mystery, this case is physically impossible; all windows are high enough to prevent anybody climbing in, they also have iron bars, the shop has good security all night long and as all employees are searched on their way out nobody could have left the building unnoticed with a loot of the size of three coats. Ernestina, a conscientious young lady whose twelve pesos the mysterious thief had taken, is the model worker, who studies English, French and stenography (this suggests a lower-middle class attitude of wanting to become educated quickly to go up the labour ladder). What inspires Ernestina is on the one hand, the employers' class degradation, for as long as the mysterious thief keeps looting they will all be suspects; also they will have to pay for the stolen items, which is unfair as they are all very honest and trustworthy people. Perhaps more importantly, what really bothers Ernestina is the fact that the crook is so immoral that he or she steals from his/her very colleagues; Ernestina had noticed that the pasties she leaves in her drawer overnight also disappear. Ernestina sets out to clear her and her peers' names and catch the thief; she leaves a poisoned croissant in her drawer overnight (she steals the potassium cyanide from the darkroom of her brother's home photo laboratory). The following day she hears the news: it was the night watchman, who it is believed committed suicide. The police found some ties in his hollow wooden leg and the rest of the stolen items in his *pensión* room.⁹³ That is why the police do not

⁹² Although not directly mentioned, a native reader would associate the character of the boss with a foreigner, possibly a Jew. This is so firstly, because textiles is a sort of trade historically associated with the porteño Jew—nowadays, the great majority of the textile wholesale and retail shops concentrated in the *barrio* Once are still run by Jews. Significantly, the name of the small department store is “Xenius”, which evokes the Greek word “xenos” meaning “stranger, foreign, host”. We can also relate the cruel meanness of the boss in this tale to that of the Italian couple who own the second-hand bookshop where Silvio Astier briefly works in *El juguete rabioso*. In that novel, as we analyse in Chapters 2 and 3, the protagonist also takes social justice into his own hands after months of mistreatment and exploitation by his abusive masters.

⁹³ The fact that the night guard lives in a rented room of a *pensión*, reinforces his socio-economic status.

investigate how that poisoned croissant ends up in his hands. Peace is finally restored in the shop and Ernestina celebrates the news with the rest of the employees.

Part of Arlt's mechanism of domesticating a popular genre for local consumption lies in his capacity to mirror the reality of his readership by reflecting the cultural heteroglossia of the city of Buenos Aires.⁹⁴ This is so, not only because the universe of Arlt's characters indeed reflects the mixture of nationalities, backgrounds and trades he has been brought up with, but also, and perhaps particularly because it also reflects his heterogeneous reading product of the 1920s and 1930s Buenos Aires. Gnutzmann comments that "[l]as lecturas arltianas, que van desde el folletín hasta la literatura 'alta', reflejan la situación literaria de Buenos Aires en los años veinte...".⁹⁵ To a greater or a lesser extent, all this is reflected in Arlt's tales. Let us take the story 'La pista de los dientes de oro',⁹⁶ it begins with a hardboiled cinematic account of Lauro Spronzini's taking off the gold layer he used to cover his two front teeth, while at the Hotel Planeta, a bellboy knocks at the door of Doménico Salvato's room.⁹⁷ There is no answer but the Mr Salvato has been seen in the company of a man with a gold tooth. Mr Salvato is found dead; he had been tied to a chair and hanged! The newspapers call it 'El enigma del bárbaro crimen del diente de oro'.⁹⁸ As it is reported that the police suspect a man with gold teeth, many men flock voluntarily to declare themselves innocent and confirm their alibis.

⁹⁴ For a discussion of literary and social heteroglossia in relation to *El juguete rabioso* see Chapter 2.

⁹⁵ Roberto Arlt, *Innovación y compromiso. La obra narrativa y periodística*. (2004), p. 147.

⁹⁶ [The clue of the gold tooth], Arlt, 1996, p. 234, *Mundo Argentino*, 20 January 1937; *El crimen casi perfecto* (Buenos Aires: Clarín/Aguilar, 1994; edited by Ornar Borré).

⁹⁷ The cinema has been the object of comment by not a few literati. In Argentina, authors like Horacio Quiroga and Jorge Luis Borges have written on it. As the jack of all trades Arlt was, he also writes about the big screen. As a popular phenomenon, the cinema becomes one of Arlt's latest preoccupations in his columns published under the 'Espectáculos' section of *El Mundo* newspaper. Although Arlt is no film critic, he produces a number of testimonies (almost always humorous) as an ordinary spectator happy to buy 'horas de olvido y ensueño por veinte guitás'. In his role of cinema chronicler, Arlt writes about names such as Valentino, Emil Jannings and Chaplin whom he compares to Shakespeare. See *Notas sobre el cinematógrafo* (Buenos Aires: Simurg, 1997; edited by G. S. M. Gallo).

⁹⁸ Arlt, 1996, p. 235.

An almost movie-like cut takes us to Lauro Spronzini who, that very day, feels an acute toothache. Dentist Diana Lucerna finds a sliver of gold touching the nerve of one of his teeth. Spronzini is told to come back the following day to fix his cavity. Diana Lucerna is sure Spronzini is the murderer though she cannot turn him in. Sexually attracted to him (he is probably a well built, tough, Italian ‘macho’ archetype), Diana pays him a visit and despite no sign of physical involvement being given she is persuaded by Spronzini’s account; he was avenging his sister, who was left to die after being diagnosed with a case of TB back in Italy by her former husband, who later escaped to Argentina. Potentially driven by desire (Spronzi promises to return to her surgery), but perhaps also partly convinced that it had been an act of justice, Diana Lucerna decides not to turn him in.

Amongst the few tales by Arlt with a hardboiled flavour we find ‘Un argentino entre gangsters’.⁹⁹ We have classified this as a hard-boiled inspired tale not only for the gangsters featured and the American setting but also for the way ‘*a la Chandler*’ in which atmosphere is created from the outset of the story;

Tony Bernman descargó la ceniza de su cigarro en el piso encerado y prosiguió:

— Los ingenieros han inventado los fusiles ametralladoras, y eso está bien (...)

Así habló Tony, el homicida de pie desnivelado. El achocolatado Eddie Rosenthal, hijo de un rabino excomulgado y de una negra, levantando la motuda cabeza que tenía inclinada sobre su camisa de seda verde, anotó (...).

Frank Lombardo, especialista en acciones violentísimas, asintió con un visaje de rojiza cara de perro bull-terrier.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ ‘Un argentino entre gangsters’ [An Argentine amongst Gangsters], publisher in *El Hogar*, 27 February 1937; *El crimen casi perfecto* (1994).

¹⁰⁰ Arlt, 1996, p. 250. The gang is made up by Tony Bergnman, a killer with a limp, Eddie Rosenthal, from Kentucky, a black son of an excommunicated Rabbi, and Frank Lombardo whose violence was notorious.

The story is about a gang of American crooks who kidnap Argentinean engineer Humberto Lacava (he has the best academic record from the Engineering School of Wisconsin University). They want him to design a roulette wheel to cheat in a casino. If Lacava refuses, they will have his family killed back home. The roulette wheel has to pass as authentic; in turn he will be paid US\$20,000. The gang, criminals but gentlemanly in their every day manners, lock him up in a room where Lacava silently assesses his chances of surviving the ordeal. For Lacava the technical problem is essentially very easy to resolve so he decides to cooperate and even toys with the idea of making money with his invention.¹⁰¹ After describing the technicalities in great detail, Lacava gets to work and in a few days he has the rigged roulette wheel ready for trial. We can see how Hollywood film noir has impacted Arlt; the setting, motel, the *modus operandi* and the etiquette of the gang—very civilised, they cook good food and have good manners—emulates the stereotypical mafia depicted in movies. A fortnight later, the roulette wheel is ready. For the final test, the men stand around the table and wait patiently. As they gaze in admiration at the cheating machine doing its trick, Lacava presses a hidden spring and they all get electrocuted! Lacava grabs the money and runs off. The nice twist of the story lies in the fact that firstly, Arlt does not reveal Lacava's intention to cheat on the gang thus keeping the suspense. Secondly, the 'national' man outwits the American crook—which might also reflect a celebration of the triumph of '*el ingenio criollo*' (or *porteño*) over the American oppressor. As in most of his tales, Arlt's own reading habits are reproduced, sometimes almost forced into his narrative. In this particular story, Arlt's self-taught background in mechanics,

¹⁰¹ The topos of making a living as an inventor is also recurrent in Arlt's oeuvre. Virtually all his main characters have a frustrated inventor inside, mainly frustrated by economic reasons. Likewise, most of them dream of being able to patent some revolutionary gadget or object to make themselves rich. In *Los siete locos* for instance, the protagonist works exhaustively to master a '*rosa de cobre*' [copper rose] that would never die. Arlt himself was obsessed with the formula of tights that, treated with rubber, will never run. See Silvia Saïta's '*La eternidad en una media de mujer*' in *Página/12*. '*El Lanzallamas Roberto Arlt / 50 años*' (Buenos Aires, 28 July 1992); and also Ricardo Piglia's '*Roberto Arlt: La ficción del dinero*', *Hispanamérica*, 7, Maryland (College Park, 1974), pp. 25-28.

learned from DIY manuals is shown as the technical details for the assembling of the faulty roulette wheel are thoroughly explained.¹⁰²

Perhaps more atypical, in the sense that they do not have a Buenos Aires setting but a European one, are the ‘Extraordinaria historia de dos tuertos’ and ‘El enigma de las tres cartas’.¹⁰³ Sharing a flavour of conspiracy, both tales are set mainly in Paris. These stories are not in Arlt’s usual porteño environment; they are different not only on the physical location but also on the usage of more formal and slightly archaic language.¹⁰⁴ Set in 1914, the ‘Extraordinaria historia de los dos tuertos’ is a rather naïve

¹⁰² See also Beatriz Sarlo’s *La imaginación técnica. Sueños modernos en la cultura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1992).

¹⁰³ Arlt, 1996, p. 506, [The extraordinary story of the two one-eyed men], *El Hogar*, 11 October 1939; [The Mystery of the Three Letters], *Mundo Argentino*, 8 November 1939; *El crimen* (1994).

¹⁰⁴ Arlt sets a number of his tales in Europe and North Africa, particularly those written in the mid 1930s when he was sent to Spain and the Spanish African enclaves as a correspondent for *El Mundo*. From this same period (from 8 April 1935) he sends regular *aguafuertes* from various cities in all Canary Islands, Andalusia, Galicia, Asturias, the Basque country as well as from Madrid, Barcelona, Tangier and Tetuan (August 1935). This visit to Europe has a great cultural impact on Arlt, particularly his stay in Morocco. In 1938 Arlt pens the theatre piece *África* and declares that his main intention is ‘exaltar la maravillosa fiesta de colorido que vislumbra el turista cuando pone los pies en Marruecos’ (in “Declaraciones de Arlt en vísperas del estreno de *África*” cited by Raúl Larra in *Roberto Arlt el torturado*, Buenos Aires: Ameghino, 1998) pp107. (See also chapter 4). The other tales included in Piglia and Borré’s edition feature a miscellaneous mixture of orientalised stories many of which are located in a foreign setting amongst which are ‘Un argentino entre gangsters’, which we have already analysed, ‘El experimento del Dr. Gene’ ([The experiment of Dr Gene] *El Hogar*, 9 September 1938), a story of Dr Gene, a green-eyed doctor who discovers a tint to dye eyes green and after selling it to half the population of Wisconsin he commits suicide because he discovers that he himself is becoming blind; ‘El bastón de la muerte’ ([The walking stick of death] (*Mundo Argentino*, 18 October 1938); ‘El crimen casi perfecto’, (*Mundo Argentino*, 19 May, *El crimen casi perfecto*, 1994) which is the story of a charlatan who tries to con the ‘Sociedad de Investigaciones Psíquicas de Castelnau’ with a very orientalised tale set in Palembang, a Dutch colony. Equally orientalised are ‘Acuérdate de Azerbaijan’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 29 September 1938, *El criador de gorilas* 1941, *El crimen* 1994), ‘Los bandidos de Uad-Djuari’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 14 December 1938, *El criador* 1941, *Obras completas* 1981), ‘Accidentado paseo a Moka’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 1 February 1938, *El criador* 1941, *Obras completas* 1981), ‘Odio desde la otra vida’ (*El Hogar*, 3 March 1939, *El criador* 1941, *Obras* 1981), ‘Una aventura en Granada’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 23 March, 1939), ‘El hombre del turbante verde’ (*El Hogar*, 14 April 1939, *El criador*, 1941, *Obras* 1981). ‘La doble trampa mortal’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 9 June 1937), ‘El cazador de orquídeas’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 26 April 1939, *El criador* 1941, *Obras* 1981), ‘Los hombres fieras’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 3 January, 1940, *El criador* 1941, *Obras* 1981), ‘La palabra que entiende el elefante’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 20 March 1940), ‘Los esbirros de Venecia’ (*Mundo Argentino*, 1 July 1942, which as Piglia and Borré point out, is the last story published before Arlt’s death on the 26), featuring locations such as Fez, Calcutta, Gibraltar, Casablanca, Tangier, Granada, Madagascar, the Ivory Coast, Ceylon and Venice. Set in the Brazilian ‘selva’ (jungle) and reminiscent of to Quiroga’s *Cuentos de la selva* (1919), ‘Una historia de fieras’ (*El Hogar*, 25 November 1939), is a tale featuring talking animals: a Yacaré (the name given to the crocodile in the region of Brazil and North East of Argentina), a Boa, a Deer and a Puma. All tales mentioned here are from *Cuentos Completos* (Piglia and Borré, eds., Buenos Aires: Esapasa Calpe Argentina S. A/ Seix Barral, 1996).

spy story narrated in the first person.¹⁰⁵ It does not feature a detective, but is a confession-like tale in which the protagonist relates the extraordinary adventure that Hortensio Lafre and he himself experienced. The protagonist is a young man who struggles to make a living (in the Barrio Latino) after his father dies and he is left with a mother and sister to support. Working as door-to-door insurance collector, he meets Monsieur Lambet in Montparnasse. Monsieur Lambet takes him under his wing as the boy reminds him of a dead son. He gets given a glass eye, moves in with the old man and soon is offered a job as a glass eyes salesman in Hamburg. As the money is good and he feels grateful to M. Lambet, the protagonist accepts and sets out for Hamburg. Once in the hotel where M. Lambet has arranged for him to stay, he wakes up to see somebody sneaking into the room, taking his glass eye from his night table, and leaving. An hour later, silently the eye is returned. Still puzzled by the previous night's episode, on the way back to Paris, he sits in the same carriage as Hortensio Lafre who is also one-eyed. Chatting, they discovered that the very same thing happened to both of them; M. Lambet, the job, the trip to Hamburg, etc. On their arrival in Paris they go straight to the police. When the police analyse the glass eyes they discovered secret messages in them; Monsieur Lambet, alias Turlot, was a secret agent.

'El enigma de las tres cartas' is another atypical tale in the sense that it has a European setting. Written in a way that reminds us of G. K. Chesterton's *Club of Queer Trades*,¹⁰⁶ this story tells the misadventures of Monsieur Perolet, a Swiss-French,

¹⁰⁵ 'La doble trampa mortal' (*Mundo Argentino*, 9 June 1937; 1996: 293) also features spies. Mr Demetriades, the boss, tells Ferrain his mission: to kill a beautiful lady, also a spy, Miss Estela because she was a double agent for the Italians. The boss clarifies: 'you won't have to kill her with your own hands, she'll do it herself; you'll just be the witness' (ibid). Miss Estela was a mole working in Ceuta, where posing as the nephew of the owner of a famous café she spies on officials. Estela sends a cable saying the bar has been burnt down in row with drunken men, no files survived. In a sort of James Bond operation they both go on plane and have to jump off, her parachute will be burn with acid so she will kill herself in the jump. They talk about Gil Robles going to power (before the Spanish Civil War). Everything goes as planned; they both get on the plane, then she jumps. The twist is that she leaves her bag behind with a bomb; the plane blows up.

¹⁰⁶ G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) is perhaps best known for his Father Brown series; *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911) is the first collection. The short, Roman Catholic priest from Essex who never loses sight of his black hat and his shabby umbrella is an empathetic detective in that he thinks himself into the

businessman who sells wooden figurines to tourists in Paris. M. Perolet receives two threatening letters. The first reads 'go back home or we'll kill you'; the second, 'we know you chucked our letter, you're playing a dangerous game'. He goes to the police but is disregarded as the threats look harmless. Isidora, his wife, suggests he should go back to Bern and he could stay with her parents looking after their business. That same day they receive a parcel; it is a chocolate bomb with a note saying 'next time it'll be a real one.' He reports it to the police. When two weeks later Perolet receives another package, this time with a snake in it, he is asked to leave the house as it has become too dangerous for the rest of the lodgers. Perolet finds note in his pocket saying 'Agency Juve will be pleased to help you'. This private investigator tells him he has been suffering from 'indirect aggression'. The private eye convinces M. Perolet that his wife, who is younger than him, is the one behind the threats, hoping he will die of a heart attack and then claim on the insurance policy. Perolet is devastated; as he hands over the cheque for the full investigation, the police break in. The private detective turns out to be a fake: he is Girolamu Lenescu, a Romanian who used to work in an insurance company from where he gets the confidential information to hoax all those applicants with heart trouble using the 'indirect aggression' plot and the promise of uncovering the scheme.

Most of the detective stories analysed here follow the dynamic of crime, investigation and restoration of peace; in the case of the last stories scrutinised elements of actual pursuit and espionage are also included. Despite following general conventions of detective fiction, Arlt tunes the rules perhaps in the need to accommodate his stories to the reality of his readership, particularly in the light of the genre's association with upper-class habits, locations, costumes and scope of criminal

mind of the criminal and then, helped by the knowledge of the crime and his 'criminal wisdom' acquired after years of listening to criminals' confessions, he catches them. Chesterton's plots are often ingenious paradoxes and although at times also fantastic and even absurd the stories reveal themselves as parables in which moral aspects are often concealed.

activities. Thus, instead of dealing with inheritances of thousands of pesos, millionaire plots, the name, reputation and fortune of great men and women of social prestige,¹⁰⁷ Arlt introduces everyday petty thefts, misdemeanours and provincial delinquency which, although on another social universe, equally affect the (common) people. At the same time, Arlt's misappropriation of detective fiction conventions also makes use of stereotypes of class, nationality and trade codified in a way that the reader of the time would have, without a doubt, deciphered. The interesting thing about the majority of the tales we have looked at is the domestication device Arlt applies to them, a social twist only relevant for the particular community receiving the story. In a typical whodunit the type of crime committed is private, that is society is only indirectly involved. Its representatives (police, investigators, detectives, etc.) act in the interest of the injured party. In Arlt's stories, the injured party is very often society in general, in particular a specific social class. Arlt's tales depict crimes against class-consciousness. As Auden points out, 'the interest of the detective story is in the dialectic of innocence and guilt'.¹⁰⁸ What Arlt does very often is to associate that innocence with the virtue of a social stratum¹⁰⁹— that of his readership— thus bending those classic roles not so much to fit a particular national model or dogma but more specifically to emulate the social morality and class ideology of his readership.

In a way, Arlt deglamourizes the typical country house setting associated with the Golden Age detective fiction read by the Argentine elite in favour of a perhaps 'more immigrant', more 'working class' set of values. Thus, Arlt successfully misappropriates

¹⁰⁷ This applies to most of Arlt's tales, perhaps with the exception of those few that we mentioned previously, where there is a clear foreign setting; this on the one hand may be alien to Arlt's reader but on the other, could be included within the historical juncture of the time (particularly 'La doble trampa mortal' in which the political situation of Spain is discussed). Equally important is the fact that Arlt's readership would have been aware of his visit to Europe and North Africa in which case those more orientalist settings and plots are also justifiable.

¹⁰⁸ Auden, 1963, p. 401.

¹⁰⁹ Subverting genres is a trick Arlt pulls often. In Chapter 5 we discuss melodrama as revolving around people's values of truth, honesty and communion, while aristocrats' morals are basically corrupt and hypocritical. What we find very interesting indeed is that in the case of *Saverio el cruel* Arlt seems to be subverting the genre. Arlt's personal twist could be the inversion of the 'traditional' melodramatic roles of good and evil.

the formulaic, conventional plots and relocates them to suit his readership who in turn could essentially read them as a socio-political conflict showing the audience the difference between popular and aristocratic values. In this respect, we may see Arlt's as a double mechanism of misappropriation of cultural capital. On the one hand, Arlt appropriates from 'other' international literatures; on the other the author also exercises a domestication of national literatures for social consumption. Arlt's personal twist, has been the domestication of the models to accommodate his readership both geographically and also, and perhaps mainly, socio-culturally thus adding his particular ideological commentary.

Lastly, it is important to bear in mind that some authors perceive the genre, particularly the whodunit school, as fundamentally incompatible with Latin American realities, particularly when we refer to the ideology codified in the structures and conventions of the whodunit. As Haycraft puts it, "[t]he detective story is and always has been essentially a democratic institution; produced on any large scale only in democracies; dramatizing under the bright cloak of entertainment, many of the precious rights and privileges that have set the dwellers in constitutional lands apart from those less fortunate."¹¹⁰ The view that the classic detective fiction formula is designed to reflect the principles, beliefs and institutions of a democratic society seems incongruous to some of Latin American non-democratic realities. At the same time, as we have discussed previously, the whodunit is equally associated with a dominant group, particularly with the highbrow tradition. Yates observes that "[d]esde el principio, el interés por la novela policíaca fue evidente, ya que, durante el lapso de 1940-1948, el destino de la novela policial argentina estuvo en manos de un grupo de escritores y

¹¹⁰ Howard Haycraft's *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Bilbo and Tannen, 1968), pp. 313-317.

críticos de gran cultura”.¹¹¹ Curiously enough, it is precisely against popularizing discourses such as Arlt’s that authors like Bustos Domecq make their case.

IV. Conclusion

As we have sought to demonstrate, Arlt’s manipulation of genre rules is by no means original: the canon furnishes us with many examples of literary texts which involve stylistic innovation or set out to modify our perceptions of how society functions. Amongst the *whodunit* and the hard-boiled schools, there are likewise a number of key authors whose innovative approach has succeeded in shaping new expectations. Even writers whose work is perhaps not quite of the first order are continually looking to introduce new elements or perspectives. The satirical edge of Dorothy Sayers’ *Murder Must Advertise* (1933), for instance, perhaps the earliest British *whodunit* to be set in an advertising agency, or the re-evaluation of the status of the aborigine in the novels of the Australian writer Arthur Upfield, provide but two instances of this phenomenon.¹¹² There are, of course, countless other ways, each of varying ingenuity, to reinvent the generic model, each author seeking to provide some local flavour to their detective tales, and thus domesticating the genre for local consumption. As we suggested earlier, there is no shortage of such examples among the Argentine *policial* tradition either.¹¹³

The cultural power of the stories analysed here, however, rests on the fact that they reflect the ideology, values and mores of the lower middle class yet without patronising them: Arlt’s melodramatic twist consists of not speaking down to his readership, a readership to which he himself belongs since it represents the newly literate.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, as González notes, Arlt’s particular sensitivity to his social and

¹¹¹ Lafforgue and Rivera, 1996, p. 12.

¹¹² Simpson, p. 13.

¹¹³ See Laforgue and Rivera 1996; Simpson and also footnote nr 6.

¹¹⁴ The attempt to expose social ethics is something that will be recurrent in most of Arlt’s oeuvre. As we discuss later on in Chapter 7 in relation to the author’s theatre, we observe Arlt’s attempt to fighting his

historical setting allowed him, unconsciously, and perhaps better than any other writer of his generation, to mediate between that historical then and there and his natural audience.¹¹⁵ Perhaps Arlt's greatest contribution to Argentine detective fiction resides in the fact that, like most of his plays and novels, his detective stories manage to advocate the 'social ethics' of a rising working class at the same time as they articulate a socio-political conflict which reveals to the reader the divergence between populist values and aristocratic/oligarchic values.

Finally, it is also important to bear in mind that the rise of a newspaper (and magazine) industry is, together with the emergence of a democratic state, the most crucial element in the development of detective fiction. At the very least, such a genre could not have proliferated in the manner in which it did without such widespread and constant circulation. Indeed, it is difficult to find an example of a culture in which subgenres develop without the encouragement of the popular press: the English Gothic novel, the sensationalist novel, the western (essentially a European phenomenon at the outset), and American science fiction were all dependent on vast new markets which were ruthlessly exploited through innovative publishing practices. Demographic changes are also essential to this process since it is only when a new readership is economically viable that the emphasis falls on publishers to encourage first of all translation and, slightly later, the consumption of locally produced writing.

In any case, as we have seen, Arlt, like most of his national and international contemporaries in the field of detective fiction was dependent for his livelihood on a flourishing popular press. In France, the same was true: Gaston Leroux, for example, was a writer whose widespread popularity largely derived from his role as a journalist: likewise Arlt's close contemporary, the Belgian author Georges Simenon, who began

crisis of conscience revolution both in the pages of *El Mundo* newspaper and in his drama. Salzman points out that Arlt would exploit both that daily column and later on the Teatro del Pueblo as "... 'aguantadero' para asestarle sus golpes al capitalismo, al comunismo y al anarquismo." (2000, p. 76).

¹¹⁵ González, Horacio. *Arlt, política y locura* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1996) pp. 13-14.

his career as a journalist before progressing to the pulp magazines and, finally, carefully nurturing his public profile when he began to sign the Maigret novels under his own name.

Though Arlt's pen earned him a living it did not, like Simenon, earn him riches. None the less, be it by means of misappropriating a popular genre such as the detective story or because his *Aguafuertes* columns ran uninterruptedly for more than a decade, Arlt's active collaboration with *El Mundo*, *El Hogar* and *Mundo Argentino* (probably the three most popular publications of the epoch) secured not only his place in *porteño* cultural life of the 1920s and 1930s but also a place in cultural history.

CHAPTER 5

Looking for an Argentine Stage Identity: The Case of Roberto Arlt.

I. Introduction

The place occupied by Roberto Arlt within Argentine letters is today incontestable. All the same, it is Arlt the auto-didact novelist and journalist that attracts the greatest attention; Arlt the playwright is a much lesser known figure, one that is frequently overlooked even. As Florian Nelle points out,¹ Arlt made a name in the theatre by means of adapting his own novels for the stage. In fact, his first play, the one that actually pushed him towards the theatre, *El humillado* (staged in 1931), represents a “translation” of a fragment of *Los siete locos* (1929) for Leónidas Barletta’s Teatro del Pueblo.² According to Bernardo Carey,³ this is a common phenomenon amongst theatre writers who, in general, prefer to adapt their prose for performance. This could explain why critical works discussing Arlt’s prose fiction vastly outnumber those which set out to analyse his dramatic contribution. In fact, the only critical work on Arlt’s theatre prior to 2000 was a study by Castagnino published in 1964.

The fact that Arlt abandoned novel writing (*El amor brujo* of 1932 is his last novel)⁴ in favour of a completely different medium may well be responsible for the

¹ See ‘Roberto Arlt y el gesto del teatro’ in *Roberto Arlt: Una modernidad argentina* (ed.) Morales Saravia and Schuchard (Madrid: Iberoamericana, Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert, 2001), pp 125-139.

² Most of the plays Roberto Arlt saw staged were premiered at the Teatro del Pueblo: *El humillado* (1931); *Prueba de amor* (1932); *Trescientos millones* (1932) *Saverio el cruel* (August 26th, 1936); *El fabricante de fantasmas*, Compañía de Milagros de la Vega and Carlos Pirelli (October 8th, 1936); *La isla desierta* (December 30th 1937); *África*, (March 17th 1938); *La fiesta del Hierro* (March 18th 1940). Arlt finished *El desierto entra en la ciudad* (Teatro El Duende, November 5th, 1953) in 1942 but died on June 26th the same year.

³ See Bernardo Carey, ‘Mossian revela el teatro de Roberto Arlt’ in *Teatro* (XXI, VI, 10, (otoño) 2000), pp. 90-92.

⁴ Though Arlt abandoned the novel, he continued to write his *Aguafuertes* and also produced a number of short stories after 1932. As Saitta points out, after 1932, in fact, ‘la cantidad de relatos publicados aumenta considerablemente.’ (2000), p. 172.

largely negative evaluation that his theatrical oeuvre has received.⁵ Figures such as Julio Cortázar, who praised Arlt's prose writings, considered his drama as 'dispensable'. Similarly, critics such as Adolfo Prieto have attacked Arlt's theatre, deeming it a sign of the artistic decadence of writer who had given in to 'presiones socio-culturales.'⁶ Despite adverse critical opinion, *Saverio el cruel* (1936), possibly the most enduring of Arlt's stage plays, proved a triumphant success, making an important contribution to the development of national Argentine theatrical tradition. So much so, that other important critics such as Ordaz believe that Arlt 'fué [sic] por autonomasia, el autor del movimiento independiente.'⁷

Here, however, we will take a different approach, arguing that Arlt's 'conversion' to the theatre was very much the product of a particular historical juncture. As Isidro Saltzman suggests, the historical context of Arlt's writing for the stage might in itself have provided the socio-cultural trigger leading to a switch from one medium to another. Likewise, it is important to note that though Arlt's implicit socio-political critique may be masked there is no doubt that it is also omnipresent.

Oswaldo Pellettieri points out that '[l]a función estética que le ha atribuido nuestra comunidad de intérpretes a la dramaturgia de Arlt es marginal.'⁸ In the present section, which needs to be read as complementing the following chapter (in which we scrutinize Arlt's *Saverio el cruel*), we set out to establish not so much the intrinsic value of Arlt's contribution to the stage but the significance and cultural meaning of *Saverio el cruel* (1936) in the context of the mid-1930s. One line of enquiry that we shall follow is that Arlt's decision to 'switch genres' is simply a practical solution to the ever-present issue of how to articulate a certain line of

⁵ See Nelle, p. 126.

⁶ Prieto 1978, p. xxx.

⁷ Ordaz, *El teatro en el Río de la Plata. Desde sus orígenes hasta nuestros días* (Buenos Aires: Liatán, 1957), p. 228.

⁸ Pellettieri (ed), *Roberto Arlt: dramaturgia y teatro independiente* (Buenos Aires: Galerna/Fundación Roberto Arlt, 2000), p. 11.

political thought. More precisely, we shall argue that by means of appropriating the conventions of both high-brow and popular theatre traditions Arlt could use the stage as a vehicle to voice a new moral agenda. This agenda – and we know the extent to which the author was a tireless opponent of poverty and social injustice (both strong themes in Arlt’s drama) – goes far beyond party political issues or a straightforward appeal to a single class interest. Perhaps Arlt’s lack of long-term commitment or a consistent political stance⁹ earned him a few unfavourable newspapers reviews. Let us take for example the last play Arlt would see staged, *La fiesta del hierro* (Teatro del Pueblo 1940). *La Prensa* newspaper, following its tradition of hostile reviews to Arlt, deems the anti-bellie piece as an inconsistent critique of society claiming that ‘El asunto, con notas del autor con espíritu de crítica social, a veces ruda, en nada beneficia la pieza’.¹⁰ In his *Aguafuertes*, nevertheless, Arlt demonstrates a high degree of social concern going beyond political party issues. This is a strong theme in Arlt’s drama which he voices as the tireless opponent of poverty and injustice.

Whichever way one tackles Arlt’s dramaturgy, one cannot overlook the fact that Arlt approaches the theatre with the same sense of experimentalism, the same sense of a ‘hands on’ experience, that characterizes his work as a novelist. Indeed, his work for the stage replicates the two most persistent features to be found in his fictional oeuvre – namely, a ‘narrative amateurism’ coupled with a tendency towards ‘cultural *bricolage*’.¹¹ Nira Etchenique points out that when writing theatre Arlt ‘No conoce su técnica ni se dedica tampoco a estudiarla. Se vale, como en toda su vida de

⁹ After Rodolfo Ghioldi published an article in *Bandera Roja* clarifying some of Arlt’s ‘errores ideológicos’ (‘ideological mistakes’) Arlt publicly confesses his intention of studying the dogma in depth. See Larra, Raúl, *Roberto Arlt, el torturado* (Buenos Aires: Futuro, 1986). In addition, in the 1930s, Arlt joins the Liga Antimperialista, an organization fighting against Uriburu’s coup. Etchenique points out that due to his ‘individualistic, rebel and disruptive temperament’ Arlt leaves the Liga soon after joining it. See *Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: La Mandrágora, 1962), p. 108.

¹⁰ Cited in Castagnino, *El Teatro de Roberto Arlt* (La Plata, Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de La Plata, 1964) p. xx.

¹¹ Nelle claims that Arlt practises *bricolage* as defined by Lévi-Straus, that is, not using raw materials for literary creation, or artistic creation, but using residues of cultural productions. Nelle also comments that as a cultural practice this is not an isolated case, but seems to be a recurrent tendency amongst artists of the time (2001), p. 135.

escritor, de la intuición y de la audacia. Sabe que no tiene tiempo de rellenar las lagunas de su cultura y que tampoco es hora de someterse a la disciplina del aprendizaje.¹² Both these tendencies, however, tend (possibly deliberately) to obfuscate the underlying political message of his writing. Yet Arlt's theatrical oeuvre offers numerous parallels with contemporary political and social developments. What is more, as we shall see shortly, it could be argued that Arlt's work for the theatre was far from value-free but sought instead to deliver a sophisticated (i.e. one that was resistant to crude exposition) ideological message. Perhaps only in some of his *Aguafuertes* does Arlt set out so consciously to adopt a clear political stance.

Using Arlt's own historical scene, we have set out to answer a number of questions in this chapter, which, as we mentioned, needs to be read in conjunction with chapter five. Firstly, we will try and understand why an author who is today at the centre of Argentine culture as a novelist and journalist, who has left a corpus of nine plays (most of which he himself helped to direct and saw staged), has been misread and underrated as a playwright for so long. Secondly, we will examine the socio-cultural coordinates as well as the national and international names that influenced Arlt's highly original dramaturgy. Although we will look in greater depth only at Arlt's *Saverio el cruel* in chapter six, we will provide a brief account of his other plays.

II. The setting

Let us begin by briefly examining the general social, historical and literary backdrop of Roberto Arlt. As we have explained elsewhere,¹³ Argentina's cultural and political map of the early twentieth century is indeed complex. Due to the imminent presidential coup to *radical* Hipólito Yrigoyen, the 1920s and 1930s stand

¹² Etchenique, pp. 87-8.

¹³ See Introduction and Chapter 1.

out as time when fascist models were resuscitated. Promoted by oligarchs and landowners who favoured the politics of ex-Dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas¹⁴ we witness the flourishing of a wave of extreme right wing ideals. Thus, during these decades there seems to be a strong need to write, perhaps re-write, a national history consistent with the patriotic values of the time. It is in such an ideological context that publications revisiting national history thrive, predominantly those aiming to revive Rosas' ideology, resuscitating at the same time the figure of the *gaucho* epitomising the traditional, brave, somewhat xenophobic national hero. Rosas, twice Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires who enjoyed dictatorial powers over the territory from 1829 to 1852, was now turned into a national idol, the icon of an Argentine pro *gaucho* resisting foreign influences; an image that 'truly' represents the ultra nationalist and ultra catholic ideology of a culturally and politically dominant group.

In parallel, two vanguard movements occupy the Buenos Aires literary arena of the period. The literary scene is dominated by the dichotomy of Florida-Boedo discussed earlier.¹⁵

The Buenos Aires stage of the time is equally divided and complex. Let us try and assess the theatre background of Arlt as a playwright. In particular, one cannot overlook the social changes the waves of immigration brought upon Argentina and how the cultural panorama of Buenos Aires, and that of the rest of the country, was affected, even rewritten, by it.

The flood of immigrants promoted by both the vision of Argentina as the granary and cattle ranch of the world together with the provisions of the 1853 constitution (that assured the economic security of all men who were physically able

¹⁴ See General Introduction, note 6.

¹⁵ See General Introduction, pp 7-8.

and wished to work the land),¹⁶ brought an influx of émigrés, mainly European, looking for a new life. The result was a human wave that descended upon Buenos Aires. With their dreams they brought their cultures, languages and dialects and seemingly overnight they created a new social order that would find its eventual expression in 1916 when leader Hipólito Yrigoyen came to power.¹⁷ Amongst these waves of immigrants there were a number of itinerant performers, mainly from European circuses who, perhaps in search of commercial opportunity, also fled to Argentina and whose skills were quickly incorporated to previously existing local, particularly country, popular forms¹⁸. It is the combination of international talents and creole circuses that gives rise to the first piece of Argentinean national theatre and sets the conventions for the later *teatro gaucho*. Thematically, this would reflect aspects of the drastic changes that were taking place, especially in rural lifestyles. The shows consisted of circus spectacles frequently including sentimental pantomimes of heroic themes performed in the ring between attractions. The audience was mainly composed of the new creole sector and the emerging immigrant masses, all of whom

¹⁶ This process of *Organización Nacional* witnesses violent changes, especially in terms of political and economic developments marked by the country's turning to the outside world for models; Britain for the economic and France for the cultural spheres. The first so-called *aluvión inmigratorio* [flood of immigrants] come along with the ideas promoted by contemporary Argentine leaders such as president Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1874-1880) and Juan Bautista Alberdi. Sarmiento's idea was that the country was a vast desert in need of cultivation and Alberdi's campaign that 'to govern is to populate'. It is within that historical setting that foreign cultural practices thrive and are eventually absorbed by the local practices.

¹⁷ In the article 'El radicalismo: Hipólito Yrigoyen', Marta Ferrera explains how president-to-be Yrigoyen (1916-1922 and 1928-1930) becomes the political voice of the new urban middle class made up of the creole sector and the first generation of immigrant descendants born in Argentina (See *Memorias de las ciudades: Buenos Aires, 1880-1930, La capital de un imperio imaginario*, (ed) Vázquez Rial, Horacio (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1996), pp 164-181. A series of strikes followed the bill designed by ex-presidents Roca (1880-86 and 1898-1904) and Pellegrini (1890-92) aiming to unify the country's debt, offering the "recaudaciones como garantías subsidiarias a los bancos europeos", a measure considered by some an attack on sovereignty. The fact that they wanted to restrict the number of immigrants who could access university education caused an even greater revolt amongst the electorate. This new lower and middle class, the majority sons of immigrants who had fought to grant that educational path for their children, were more concerned with their access to the professional, urban life than with the conflict between the *terratiente* (land owner) elite and the government.

¹⁸ Popular theatre in Argentina, like in the rest of Latin America, begins with clowns and circuses. This is particularly true for Argentina, especially after its independence in 1816. See Adam Versényi, *Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics and Culture from Cortés to the 1980s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

were searching for a means of forging a new, 'national' identity. It was through the figure of the *gaucho* that they would mainly find it, and around this proud, brave, individualistic character a national consensus is formed paving the way to the later twentieth century national theatre.

III. The Background

A major development in Latin American theatre, however, comes with the adaptation of Eduardo Gutiérrez's novel *Juan Moreira* since this indicates a tendency of amalgamating the imported form of the circus with the popular theme of the *gaucho*. Indeed, with his *folletín* (novel in instalments) *Juan Moreira* (1884-1899), Eduardo Gutiérrez (1851-1899) is considered to have paved the way for the evolution of the national novel. Although Gutiérrez's narrative was, at the time, considered irredeemably lowbrow, his romantic, detectivesque series was hugely popular. With the adaptation of *Juan Moreira*, the *Teatro gaucho* was born and with it many of the themes, conventions and concerns that would mark the subsequent Argentine theatre, into the twentieth century.¹⁹ For critics such as Mazziotti the fusion of the acting, singing and dancing codes inherited from the *zarzuela* merged with the direct communication with the audience available through the circus practices would constitute a significant aspect of the mobility, agility and body movement typical of the *sainetes*.²⁰ It was the owners of the renowned Circo Humberto I, the Carlo brothers, who came up with the idea of adapting Eduardo Gutiérrez's popular serial novel. The show, first performed in 1886, was so successful that soon the company adapted the play for the city stage. This might have been just a marketing strategy used by the Italian brothers in the hope of attracting a greater audience for their pantomime. What is true is that the consequence of staging tales that showed the

¹⁹ See Versényi, pp 70-2.

²⁰ Nora Mazziotti, 'El auge de las revistas teatrales argentinas 1910-1934' in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* (No 425, November, 1985), p. 74.

ethics, cleverness and talents of the local cowboy, as Versényi explains, will prove seminal to later theatre practices in Argentina.²¹ Indeed, the key factor for this lies in *Juan Moreira's* precursors, the *sainete criollo* and the *gauchesque* poetry.

What is significant about *Juan Moreira* is that the piece reflects the social changes portrayed by the *gauchesque* literature,²² a popular genre that developed extensively in Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil. The final phase of the *gauchesque* poetry, probably also the best-known period, corresponds to José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1872-79).²³ Although the immigration of large numbers of European farmers to the Pampas in the late nineteenth century marks the beginning of the *gaucho's* gradual disappearance, the image of *Martín Fierro*—incarnating the eighteenth century romantic, untamed and brave man—would be kept alive in the popular imagination. Later in history, this iconic image will be revived and exploited as epitomising the 'true' Argentine spirit and values.

Alongside the *gauchesque poetry* there are the colonial *sainetes*, a theatrical form representative of the 1800s. Although the *sainete* inherits the main characteristics of the Spanish *zarzuela* and *sainete español* (also called *género chico*

²¹ Versényi, p 74.

²² Critics such as Ricardo Rojas and Ángel Rama describe *gauchesque* poetry as a 'parallel' literary system. Without a European model, *gauchesque* literature was born and cultivated throughout the nineteenth century not only in Argentina but also in Uruguay, Paraguay and the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. Although it has to some extent been considered 'the' Argentine genre (because of the particular attention to River Plate language and form) it constitutes one that was not seen as readable for a long time. Widely popular; *la gauchesque* depicts the themes, the mimetic posing of rural culture, wisdom and oral tradition of the native people in the voice of the *payador*, a wandering minstrel. At the same time, it touches upon social and political problems of the epoch and although it shows a great degree of linguistic dexterity and wittiness it seems to have remained a minor genre. Juan Baltazar Maciel (1727-1788) could be considered the precursor of the movement, the first verses of his popular poem 'Canta un guaso en estilo campestre los triunfos del Excmo. señor don Pedro de Cevallos' would become the rhyming formula adopted by the *gauchesque*. ('*Aquí me pongo a cantar / debajo de aquestas talas*') later immortalised in Hernández's *Martín Fierro* (1872). What defines *la gauchesque* is the passing of the narrative voice to the gaucho who, following poetic conventions, developed the rhetoric of the genre. Although the best-known poem is Hernández's *Martín Fierro*, there are a number of authors who contributed to the genre; a number of anonymous texts has also been produced.

²³ José Hernández's *Martín Fierro* is an epic poem divided in two parts; *Martín Fierro* (1872) and *La vuelta de Martín Fierro* (1879).

español, namely the Spanish 17th century light, comic operetta featuring a mixture of dance, music, melodrama and comedy), the genre is ‘domesticated’ for local consumption. Indeed, the *género chico español* proved the perfect mould for many an Argentine author. González Castillo, a prolific *sainete* writer, comments that, “el género chico español, ofrecía un modelo magnífico de copiar. El chulo era el original graciosísimo de nuestro compadrito porteño. La chulapa, nuestra taquera de barrio, el pelma sablista de los Madriles nuestro vulgar pechador callejero, las verbenas nuestras milongas, las broncas nuestros bochinches.”²⁴ As a clear example of this we find the ‘*drama gauchesco*’, the theatrical representation performed in the second part of the shows. These light, comic operettas are relocated to fit the contemporary Argentine setting, reflecting the voice of the ordinary city dweller but also highlighting a variety of more cosmopolitan and newer popular forms (demographics show that at times the immigrants outnumber the native-born population).²⁵ Like the *Commedia dell’ Arte*, the *sainete* reproduces well-known stereotypes, mocking nationalities, trades and social backgrounds, making the ‘shared background’ factor indispensable for the decoding of the stereotype. Each character has a set of characteristics (dress code, way of talking, etc) that is almost invariable. The *género chico* becomes a hybrid, a mixture of gauchesque serial novels and Spanish *sainete*,

²⁴ Cited in Cianci, ‘Circo y teatro: el espectáculo y el público en el Río de la Plata entre 1880 y 1930 (II)’, originally Publisher in *Insomnia* (No 21) (<http://www.henciclopedia.org.uy/autores/Ciancio/Circosainete.htm>; accessed June, 2006).

²⁵ According to Clara Brown and Julio Cacciatore, up to the mid 1880s, the changes undergone by the city of Buenos Aires were almost imperceptible. However, after the fall of Governor Rosas (1852) the city started a process of rapid development, first due to the income the port generated, now in the hands of the authorities (no longer controlled by Rosas) and secondly because of the 1853 law backing Alberdi’s policy of ‘gobernar es poblar’ campaign (‘to govern is to populate’). This law opened the first big wave of immigration into Argentina (only a minority of those were qualified). In 1869, Buenos Aires had 180,000 inhabitants, 67% of them were foreigners. By 1895 there were 600,000 inhabitants, 74% of whom had not been born in Argentina (50% of them were actually Italians). Records of the port show that between 1857 and 1914 3,300,000 immigrants enter Argentina, most of them stayed in Buenos Aires. See ‘El imaginario interior: el intendente Alvear y sus herederos. Metamorfosis y modernidad urbana’, in *La capital de un imperio imaginario* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1996) pp. 31-71.

condensing the significant cultural transformation that takes place in *porteño*²⁶ society at the turn of the twentieth century.

Carella defines the *sainete porteño* as a short, light piece reflecting the everyday life of the people, very often ending with a dramatic moral.²⁷ Following the conventions of its model, music is more important than text. Mocking the foreigners becomes a recurrent theme to the point that nowadays it could sometimes be read as mild xenophobia. This recurrent line of comment on foreigners happens for two main reasons: firstly, because it would have been impossible not to notice the foreigners at the time simply because they outnumbered the native population (to the point that they soon become a new social order, creating new trades, stereotypes, etc); secondly, because the newcomers posed as antagonistic characters to the national ideals. The language used in the *sainete* is also representative of this new phenomenon, making use of vernacular and grotesque expressions. Serious academics, protectors of the proper uses of grammar soon raised the alarm as this new idiom advocated a more colloquial use of language, highlighting the legitimacy of hybrid dialects and folklore argot. At the same time, it mocks and discards institutional grammar as pompous and unpractical.²⁸

Amongst the better-known *sainete porteño* writers we find a miscellaneous mixture of Italian, Jewish, Spanish, German, French and of course Uruguayan and Chilean authors. From this multi-ethnic trend a new urban form will emerge subsequently giving rise to what has been considered the first truly national genre

²⁶ Literally 'from the port', but used, some times pejoratively, to refer to somebody from the city of Buenos Aires.

²⁷ See Carella, *El sainete criollo-antología. Selección, estudio preliminar y notas*, (Buenos Aires: serie El pasado argentino, 1957)

²⁸ *El amor de la estanciera* (1778), *El detalle de la acción de Maipú* (1796?) and *Las bodas de Chivico y Pancha* (1823) would be representative of the *sainete*. For more examples of *sainetes* see Carella (1957) or Versényi (1993). Arlt must have drawn some inspiration from the *sainetes*, not only as regards the stereotyping of immigrants but also, but perhaps mainly due to the usage of colloquial and "improper" Spanish. It is that freedom from language correctness that Arlt advocates in his 'El idioma de los argentinos' (*Aguafuertes porteñas: Cronicón de sí mismo seguido de El idioma de los argentinos* (Buenos Aires: Edicom, 1969), pp. 149-52.

reflecting local life, new language and contemporary events. Indeed, so dependent on the national socio-historical context is this tradition that, as Carella points out, the *sainete porteño* is generally considered a historical phenomenon rather than an artistic movement to the extent that very often it becomes obscure to non-contemporaries.

The expansion of theatre activity in the Argentina of the beginning of the century could be traced through the proliferation of numerous theatre magazines which, reflecting the rise and fall of the popular *género chico*, appeared and disappeared with the theatrical wave that sustained it. With more than forty different titles (published between 1910 and 1934) these magazines offer something more than the pieces themselves. In addition, they constitute an invaluable insight into both the Argentine theatre in particular and, more generally, into the process of modernization, which in Argentina begins in the late 1880s. According to Altamirano and Sarlo, the magazines “formaba[n] parte del proceso más vasto de modernización que afectaba la sociedad argentina y que había recibido su impulso más resuelto desde la década de 1880.”²⁹ Fuelled by authors, actors, impresarios, musicians, and journalists, the “theatre phenomenon”³⁰ starts building up from 1880s and goes beyond the Argentine borders as it is also observable in Montevideo, Uruguay. In Argentina, it tends to cluster in Buenos Aires (the capital city as opposed to the province), although it does extend to other big cities, mainly Rosario (Santa Fé province) and La Plata (capital city of Buenos Aires province). Mazziotti believes this phenomenon constitutes the most important movement in the theatrical experiences in River Plate theatre history.³¹

There are two clear signs that indicate the scale of the rise of *género chico* and how significant a phenomenon it proved at the time. Firstly, there is an abundant

²⁹ See Altamirano and Sarlo, ‘La Argentina del centenario: campo intelectual, vida literaria y temas ideológicos’, *Ensayos argentinos. De Sarmiento a la vanguardia* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor, 1983), p. 71.

³⁰ See Mazziotti, p. 73.

³¹ Ibid.

productivity of the authors involved in the process. The fact that playwrights like García Velloso, Alberto Vacarezza, González Castillo and Mauricio Pacheco staged nearly a hundred plays each (one hundred and forty, a hundred and twenty, ninety and seventy plays respectively) clearly reflects the magnitude of this popular movement. Secondly, the cities undergo a significant physical transformation, a phenomenon particularly observable if we concentrate on Buenos Aires. Between 1880 and 1930, sixty venues open in Buenos Aires— and this is only in the city centre. In 1906, there are thirteen venues in the city centre alone. By 1911 there are already twenty-one; by 1925, thirty-two and in 1928, forty-three. Although at a slower pace, in other sectors of Buenos Aires such as Boedo, Once, Villa Crespo, Flores and Belgrano, venues also multiplied. La Boca, for instance, epicentre of the Genovese immigrant population, had seven venues, one entirely devoted to lyrical shows.

Mazziotti enumerates various causes that contribute to the rise and popularity of the *género chico*.³² Firstly, indisputably, immigration becomes an important factor. The immigration current entering Argentina between the late 1880s and early 1910s is reflected in many an aspect of the young city. This means that the number of people who go to the theatre also increased. Waisberg points out that in 1889, Buenos Aires had 2.5 million theatregoers per annum, a figure that would grow, reaching 6.9 million on 1925.³³ Secondly, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the majority of the immigrant population in Argentina comes from Spain and Italy, both countries with a strong theatre tradition. For them, going to the theatre is not only the continuation of an established cultural and social practice but also becomes a process of integration within the new culture. Thirdly, the genre itself was family oriented. Divided in sections, the shows provided the audience with the option of choosing the performances according to age, taste, etc.. But perhaps the most significant influence

³² Mazziotti, p. 76.

³³ Waisberg, Pablo, 'El espectador ausente', *Crear* (year I, No 3, March/April, 1981).

for the proliferation of the genre consists of the role of the press as a means of promoting a cultural industry.

By contrast, the established city theatres of the time would also cater for another audience. The proliferation of the *género chico* coexists, of course, with more ‘serious’ *género grande* models (amongst the *género grande* tradition we find drama –urban, rural, *gauchesque*, social, etc– and comedy –*costumbrista*, high, provincial, etc), although the latter could not match the popularity experienced by the *género chico*. The *género grande* tradition was also descended from European traditions– but this time a “high” culture that, although with a marked delay, offers the city audience all the innovations of neoclassicism, romanticism, naturalism and realism. While the intelligentsia is familiar with Zola, Ibsen and Sudermann, Buenos Aires mainstream taste is inclined towards Echegaray’s romanticism, Bretón de los Herreros’ *costumbrismo* and social realism. Later on, by the 1930s, some more experimental sectors such as the Boedo Group would also be interested in the expansion of Antoine’s Théâtre Libre.³⁴ The concerns of these two theatrical currents (*géneros grande* and *chico*), the cultured and the popular, will mirror the bifurcated social structure that characterised the nineteenth and the twentieth century as Argentina became integrated into the political-economic system of the modern world.

With that first wave of immigration already settled in Argentina came a perception of Latin American countries no longer as colonies of, or an expansion of Europe. Thus two important currents begin to stand out in the Argentine literary scene. On the one hand, the new situation gave rise to patrician and bourgeois groups of writers who fought against Argentina’s provincialism, experimenting with a form of *costumbrismo* and of a *drama rural* which celebrate local history. This will be the case of *floridista* Ricardo Güiraldes, Arlt’s highbrow mentor who, educated in

³⁴ See Walter Relas *Teatro gauchesco primitivo* and *Teatro uruguayo 1807-1979* (Montevideo: Ediciones de la Alianza, 1980), pp. 14-15 and 26-27 respectively.

Europe, will still defend a national, canonical tradition. On the other hand, the theatre began to turn its gaze upon the port areas, the border regions where the river of immigrants flowing into the country would gather, creating a new urban, theatrical consciousness under the name of *grotesco criollo* (which inherits the principal features of the *género chico*). As a result, the great variety of popular theatre forms, imported mainly from Spain and Italy, combined with local forms, would reflect the foreigners' need to feel part of the community while maintaining their individual characteristics. According to Luis Ordaz, for this audience, the stage would offer "a forum for presenting the unmasked truth of their lives".³⁵

Such is the background Arlt inherits as a playwright and against which his plays will be projected. Often pigeonholed within the Boedo group, we argue that Arlt transcended the Florida-Boedo opposition because, from the very beginning, his literary career is launched from a controversial and marginal standpoint. It is true that in terms of his narrative, Arlt has mostly been, at least thematically, tied to the socially oriented Boedo, although it is also true that he has links with the Florida group. According to Mirta Arlt, when we turn to the theatre however, neither by the way in which the author saw the world nor by his theatrical technique, could Roberto Arlt have been part of the Florida stage vogue.³⁶ Nevertheless, although Arlt himself would be very sceptical about such Florida-Boedo categorization, when we turn to his place on the stage it is perhaps inevitable to link his name to Boedo.

³⁵ See Ordaz, *Historia del Teatro argentino* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1982), p. 412.

³⁶ Comprised between the decades of the thirties and forties, this trend is usually considered to open with Ricardo Rojas' *Ollantay*, staged by the Comedia Nacional, and to finish with *floridista* Nalé Roxlo's *La cola de la sirena*. See Mirta Arlt, *Teatro completo de Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Schapire, 1968 (vol 1), p. 15.

III. Roberto Arlt and the Teatro del Pueblo

The 1930s, the decade in which Arlt initiated his theatre career, would prove a pivotal one for national theatre history, for it is at that moment that Leónidas Barletta (1902-1975), one of the key names of the Boedo group, set up the Teatro del Pueblo. As Versényi points out, the Teatro del Pueblo was perhaps the first non-commercial theatre in Latin America.³⁷ Up to that point, European theatres, mainly Spanish, Italian and French, had almost entirely dominated the Argentine metropolitan theatre arena. This is not altogether surprising given that the majority of the mainstream, commercial theatres were run by the same families who had founded them, those arriving in Argentina with the first big wave of immigrants at the end of the 1880s. Such companies established a name and status amongst the Buenos Aires population and as such exclusively catered for a mainly commercial audience. Barletta's Teatro del Pueblo staged works of a number of European playwrights, Shakespeare, Gogol, Tolstoi, Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Molière, to name a few. At the same time, it also catered for 'the people' who wanted to see what the *generación del 900* had to offer. Thus, local, contemporary names such as Raúl González Tuñón, Nicolás Olivari, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, Eduardo González Lanuza and of course Roberto Arlt were also part of the Teatro's cultural agenda.

Even though Barletta was the first, the attempt to create an independent, avant-garde, non-commercial theatre is certainly not an original idea of his; it is something both highbrow and popular traditions had been after since the 1920s. In 1925, for instance, *floridista* Sandro Piantanida wrote a manifesto promoting the need for an artistic theatre in the tradition of Craig, Funchs, Meyerhold and Stanislawski.³⁸ At one end of the cultural map, this independent theatre Piantanida has in mind would

³⁷ Versényi, p. 141.

³⁸ Piantanida, 'Para un teatro de arte en Buenos Aires'. *Martín Fierro* (No 17, Buenos Aires: 1995), p. 111.

represent the forum for the ‘new sensibility’ so characteristic of the *martinfierristas*³⁹. Later on in the same decade, other manifestos and articles came out, also voicing the need to cater for the Buenos Aires artistic intelligentsia. In 1929, Vicente Martínez Cuitiño insisted that it is “lamentable que una ciudad de dos millones de habitantes, que es algo así como el centro artístico de Sudamérica, carezca de un Teatro experimental.”⁴⁰ At the opposite end of the scale, we find the Boedo group fighting for recognition within the national literary scene and, in keeping with the *boedista* dogma, also encouraging a non-commercial, independent theatre, but with different aesthetics. Barletta was granted a concession for the venue and under the provisions of a decree passed in 1912 the independent Teatro del Pueblo was founded.⁴¹ The Teatro del Pueblo was subsidised by the City of Buenos Aires and, keeping to the principles of the *boedistas*, it promoted a popular theatre accessible to people of all social backgrounds, thus becoming the first ‘proper’ popular theatre in Buenos Aires. As such, it catered for a different artistic and intellectual group, one that, so far, had not been granted a place on the Argentine stage. This represents Barletta’s attempt to fill that cultural vacuum “sin darle crédito a las exigencias estilísticas de *Martín Fierro*.”⁴² This avant-garde, experimental theatre paid particular tribute to national authors and artists, including of course first and second generation of artists who were too rooted in popular culture to enter the canonical mainstream. The Teatro del Pueblo stands out because it experimented with new techniques, focusing on the role

³⁹ *Martín Fierro* (1924-1927) is one of the literary magazines representative of the aesthetics of the Florida group; ‘*martinfierrista*’ thus is often used as synonymous with ‘*floridista*’. Names such as Oliverio Girondo, one of its founders, Rojas Paz, Palacios, Nalé Roxlo, Raúl González Tuñón, Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Cané, López Merino and Scalabrini Ortiz are just a few of the regular contributors to the avant-garde publication.

⁴⁰ Cited in Ordaz 1957, p. 202.

⁴¹ In 1912, the Council of the City of Buenos Aires passed a decree by means of which a new ‘popular theatre aiming to offer instructive and moralizing shows’ would be created. Although the Teatro del Pueblo started its activities in 1931, it is not until 1936 that Leónidas Barletta would be given a theatre building in concession. Barletta continued to be director of the Teatro del Pueblo until he died in 1975. The most prolific period of the theatre is perhaps between 1937 and 1943 when the theatre was forced to move premises as the Military government closed it down. The theatre continues working today under the administration of the Fundación SOMI.

⁴² Ordaz, 1957, p. 207.

of the director and challenging the commercial theatre. In Barletta's own words, it would bring the art to the masses, thus promoting the spiritual elevation of *all our people*. Arlt would be amongst the key figures contributing to this *Teatro independiente* movement.

By 1931, the year when *El humillado*, a fragment of Arlt's second novel *Los siete locos*, was adapted for the stage, Arlt was already a well-known novelist and journalist who, encouraged by Barletta, would combine his journalistic and narrative career with the writing and staging of his own plays. But before beginning the analysis of *Saverio el cruel*, let us briefly consider the rest of Arlt's theatre writing.

IV. Arlt and the Theatre

If Roberto Arlt earned the cliché label of 'bad writer' in relation to his novelistic production (allegedly, he could not spell), he was certainly a self-made man when we refer to his theatre.⁴³ In *Teatro completo de Roberto Arlt*, Mirta Arlt reminds us that following his "criterio de inventor, de explorador intuitivo acuñó formas por el procedimiento de prueba y error."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this 'intuitive' creativity, as opposed to a scholarly training, does not imply that he was unaware of the theoretical and formal problems associated with writing. In actual fact, Arlt himself was conscious of his limitations. Despite this, Arlt believed that all creators could outsmart natural talent by mastering what the Greeks called *tekne*.⁴⁵ Even though Arlt himself acknowledged his amateurism, his success in Barletta's Teatro del Pueblo secured him a place on the national stage. Talking about his first production, Arlt confessed that "[e]l estreno, las representaciones (alcanzan a treinta), lo cual es un fenómeno en un Teatro de arte como el de Barletta, me ha convencido de que si

⁴³ See footnote nr 2.

⁴⁴ Arlt, *Teatro completo de Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Schapire, 1968: vols 1 and 2), Vol 1, p.7. All cites are taken from this edition.

⁴⁵ See Arlt, Vol. II, p. 9.

técnicamente no he construído una obra perfecta, la dosis de humanidad y de piedad que hay en ella llega al público, conmoviéndolo por la pureza de su intención.”⁴⁶

Prolific a writer as he was, Arlt sets to write *Prueba de amor*. In this play, Arlt reflects the same preoccupations as in some of his novels, particularly *El amor brujo* (1932) and the short stories ‘Ester Primavera’ and ‘El jorobadito’, all of which deal with male characters plotting in order to ‘see through’ the women they are about to marry (this is often done by setting ‘tests’ based on deception and misleading information that males hope their women will ‘pass’ by staying loyal to them, whatever the circumstances). Perhaps reflecting the growth of the international population of the city, Arlt begins to give his characters foreign names, and tells us that Guinter descends “de las razas del norte.”⁴⁷ Obsession with virginity is one of his most recurrent themes. In *Prueba de amor*, mirroring in a way certain changes in social values in the Buenos Aires of the thirties, we see how women find it difficult to comply with certain binding social practices and customs, becoming devalued if they do not remain virtuous. We also see how men are ‘at social risk’ of being ridiculed for their good faith. Risking her social reputation, Frida visits Guinter’s place for the first time (on her own), agreeing to his wish that she comply with his “auténtica prueba de amor” [i.e. ‘true proof of love’].⁴⁸ Convinced that women’s giving up virginity cannot be compared to the sacrifice men have to make (both in monetary and social terms) when they agree to marry, Guinter’s love test (contrary to what the 24-year-old protagonist or the audience expect), consists in letting him set fire to a pile of cash he presents as ‘his entire fortune’. Certain that women marry to secure their financial future, Frida will have to prove her true love for him: “... y cuando este sucio papel haya terminado de arder, yo me habré quedado pobre... y entonces.

⁴⁶ Etchenique, p. 88.

⁴⁷ Arlt, Vol. I, p. 33.

⁴⁸ Arlt, p. 29.

si vos persistís en casarte conmigo, es verdad que me querés...⁴⁹ Frida lets him burn the money. She still loves him, actually more than before as she considers that ‘love test’ the most romantic and brave gesture a woman has ever seen. Guinter confesses he has only burnt a stack of paper; they would be happy now as they will have the money and she has proved her true love. Paradoxically, the *prueba* backfires as despite their economically secured future, Frida despises his dishonesty and leaves him.

Turning to his experience as a journalist Arlt re-writes a real case that had been in his mind for a few years (in 1927 he was a crime reporter for the newspaper *Crítica*)⁵⁰. Perhaps emulating Poe’s ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ (1842), Arlt stages *300 millones* (1932), the story of a twenty-year-old Spanish maid who commits suicide, fed up with her insignificant existence and of having to satisfy the sexual needs of her employer’s son. The result is a juxtaposition of realism and fantasy, an intercalation of reality and fiction—a technique Arlt will appropriate and turn into his trademark. Thus, the protagonist alternates between her daydreams inspired by the serial novels she reads for escapism (the stage is at times crowded with Ponson du Terrail’s Rocambole and other fictional characters) and the intrusion of ‘real’ characters. The fierce knocking on her door; sometimes *la patrona* interrupts her interludes of happiness (which only occur when she is daydreaming): “Oiga... ¿se puede saber lo que le pasa que no viene cuando la llaman?”, demands the mistress.⁵¹ Some other times it is the drunk, young master whose constant abuse eventually drives her to suicide:

⁴⁹ Arlt, p. 36.

⁵⁰ Arlt explains that “en el año 1927 [...] tuve [...] que hacer una crónica del suicidio de una sirvienta española, soltera, de veinte años de edad, que se mató arrojándose bajo las ruedas de un tranvía [...] Posiblemente no le hubiera dado ninguna importancia al suceso [...] si investigaciones que efectué posteriormente en la casa de la suicida no me hubieran proporcionado dos detalles singulares.” See Etchenique (1962, pp. 88-9). Arlt had been shocked by two things he found out after talking to the people in the house. Firstly, he learned that the Spanish maid had apparently spent the night awake; her bed had not been slept in. Secondly, that she had also forgotten to turn her light off. Those two details, Arlt explains, haunted him for months.

⁵¹ Arlt, p. 100.

...se hace visible la carátula grotesca del

HIJO DE LA PATRONA. *Desmelenado y ebrio grita...*

Hijo. – Abrí, Sofía... Abrí, no seas testaruda, Sofía....

Hijo. – Abrí... Abrí... no te hagas la estrecha...

La SIRVIENTA *coge el revolver y apoya el caño en su frente.*⁵²

After the success of *Saverio el cruel* (1936), Arlt briefly flirted with the commercial stage with *El fabricante de fantasmas* (1936). In the play, Pedro is an unsuccessful playwright who, sexually rejected by his wife, sets out to find himself a ‘proper’ job, the condition his wife sets for the resumption of sexual relations. Pedro starts writing a play, the characters of which, together with his ‘conscience’, will populate his daydreams, that become more and more recurrent as days go by. A paradoxical stroke of luck changes Pedro’s star when he accidentally kills his wife by pushing her out of the window. Theatre success and money come when Pedro stages his new play about a man who fortuitously kills his wife. In the hope of escaping from the haunting daydreams he starts suffering after his success, which now alternate with shorter periods of sanity, Pedro sets off for Europe (in his recurrent visions, the characters of his plays come alive to torture him). This change of location only makes things worse when, in a masked ball in Venice, he falls in love with a young lady who turns out to be the spitting image of his deceased wife. Once Pedro is back home, the characters of the play continue to haunt him, and push him to a point of no return; Pedro commits suicide by jumping out of a window.⁵³ However, as Arlt himself predicted in an *Aguafuerte* published in the *El Mundo* newspaper the day

⁵² Arlt, pp. 106-7.

⁵³ See Naomi Lindstrom’s ‘Madness in Arlt’s Fiction’ in *Chasqui*, (IV, 3, Provo, Utah, May 1975), pp. 227-229.

before the play's opening,⁵⁴ and although some critics blamed the failure on the director, the play indeed had a very bad reception and hardly survived a week.

La isla desierta (1937) exemplifies Mirta Arlt's claim that Arlt's trade mark in the theatre is his parting with, or rather in this case, condensing, the contemporary literary conventions of his time: "Las piezas representativas del gusto establecido no le interesaban, pues a juzgar por su propio teatro echó a correr para el lado contrario del costumbrismo, el color local y el realismo a menudo melodramático del drama doméstico."⁵⁵ In *La isla*, following his intentions to comply with certain rules, Roberto Arlt includes the denomination of 'burlería'. This highlights how original Arlt was as this description would have applied, so far, only to narrative. As pointed out by Raúl Castagnino in *El Teatro de Roberto Arlt*:

No creo que haya sido empleada (la denominación de "burlería") antes por ningún autor teatral argentino: es más, en rigor preceptístico la denominación corresponde a una especie narrativa y no dramática. Retóricas y Diccionarios de Términos Literarios denominan "burlería" un cuento fabuloso o consejo de viejas.⁵⁶

Indeed, the piece essentially represents a 'tall story'. Working in the grim and oppressive office of a small shipping company, María, Manuel and a number of anonymous employees complain about their insignificant existence and the boss's tyranny. Their awareness of the world, imagination, and a yearning for improvement are all triggered when they are moved from the basement to a tenth floor office:

TENEDOR DE LIBROS. —Don Manuel tiene razón. Cuando trabajábamos en el subsuelo no nos equivocábamos nunca.

⁵⁴ In his 'Habla Roberto Arlt sobre la obra que estrenará mañana' (El Mundo, 7 de Octubre de 1936) Arlt discusses his play and admits that even when most characters in it have been sketched in previous works (namely *Los siete locos* and short story compilation *El jorobadito*), he was inspired by Flaubert and Anatole France, as well as the paintings of Goya, Durero and Bruegel. el Viejo he saw in his visit to Spanish museums. Arlt also complains about contemporary critics who seem to loosely use the term 'Pirandellian' whenever ghosts appear on stage thus neglecting the previous work of Calderón, Shakespeare or Goethe.

⁵⁵ Arlt, p. 9.

⁵⁶ Castagnino, p. 9.

MARÍA. — Cierto; nunca nos sucedió esto.

EMPLEADA 1a — Hace siete años.

EMPLEADO 1o — ¿Ya han pasado siete años?

[...]

MARÍA— ¿Se dan cuenta? Ninguno de los que trabajan aquí ha subido a un buque.

EMPLEADA 2a— Parece mentira que ninguno haya viajado.⁵⁷

Change, and subsequent revolution, is brought when Cipriano (a messenger), a mulatto also working at the same office, starts talking about his days at sea. A ray of ‘Orientalism’⁵⁸ and, literally, colour are introduced to the room and in their lives, which despite the new window are still bleak, not only through the Mulatto’s tales of exotic islands and locations but also through an unexpected, mild strip-tease (although he is described as wearing red and white polka dot boxer shorts, the rest of his body is displayed for inspection). In front of incredulous Manuel and a shocked but not altogether scandalised María, Cipriano shows proof of his numerous voyages and reveals his tattooed body, prompting them to dream of an utopian existence at the time that he enchants them with rhythms of the foreign and everybody engages in a trance-like dance:

EMPLEADA 1a— Cuente, Cirpriano, cuente.

MULATO— Y los arroyuelos cantan entre las breñas. Y también hay negros. Negros que por la noche baten el tambor. Así.

*El MULATO toma la tapa de la máquina de escribir y comienza a batir el tam, tam ancestral al mismo tiempo que oscila simiesco sobre sí mismo. Sugestionados por el ritmo, van entrando todos en la danza.*⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Arlt, vol. II, p. 18-19.

⁵⁸ See footnote No 66 where we discuss Said’s concept in greater detail.

⁵⁹ Arlt, vol. II, p. 27.

The character's dreams are shattered as both boss and company director walk into them in the middle of their dance, fires all of them and blanks out the windows so that the new employees do not get carried away by daydreaming of a better world:

EL JEFE (*entrando bruscamente con el DIRECTOR, con voz de trueno*) –

— ¿Qué pasa aquí?

MARÍA (*después de alguna vacilación*) — Señor... esta ventana maldita y el Puerto... Y los buques... esos buques malditos...

EMPLEADA 2a. — Y este negro.

DIRECTOR— Oh... comprendo... comprendo. (*al JEFE*) Despida a todo el personal. Haga poner vidrios opacos en la ventana.⁶⁰

In *La isla desierta*, Roberto Arlt reflects the constant preoccupation that haunts his characters: the perpetual search for happiness. And as that goal is sought and not found, individuals in Arlt's work experience a sense of having been conned, deceived, swindled particularly by God, who in Arlt's eyes, represents "la alegría de vivir."⁶¹ Mirta Arlt goes on to explain that according to Arlt's cosmic order anything conspiring against the 'joy of living' is considered impure, a disease assailing the human race. She also describes how for Arlt, routine has a most annihilating power, lowering 'civilised' men to behave like automata subjugated by the dictatorship of money. It is this money-driven society that is to blame for the thousands of men 'buried alive' in dismal offices. Thus, a need to destroy capitalist society is announced: the yearning is not motivated by a desire for power, but for happiness.

And it is in that search for happiness mentioned by Mirta Arlt where we find perhaps *the* most recurrent premise in Arlt's whole oeuvre: the fact that bravery is achieved by happiness. In principle a realistic and social premise (it can be accomplished by those from a more privileged social background), it is forever hindered by a metaphysical argument. In this way, the double-goaled search Mirta

⁶⁰ Arlt, vol. II, p. 28.

⁶¹ Arlt, vol. II, p. 12.

Arlt calls 'dialéctica del traslado' involves targeting a social evil when the good sought by the characters is not social but metaphysical. In this sense, she points out, the characters' recurrent dream of travelling somewhere else, pursuing spiritual comfort or just escaping, is not exactly a new trick, as we have seen this resource in Shakespeare's Prospero setting for his magic island, Titania and her enchanted forest, King Lear and his desert, Macbeth and the crime scene or Othello and Cyprus, to name a few. Arlt's characters, however, do not physically travel anywhere. What they do is pretend they go to places by daydreaming.

In *La isla desierta*, as well as in *El desierto entra en la ciudad* (Teatro El Duende, November, 5, 1953, which Arlt finished in 1942, but did not see staged), this imaginary journey in search of a dream becomes romanticized. A Rousseauian twist is introduced in *La isla* as happiness is associated with a return to Nature symbolising a restoration of the primal state of the man. *La isla desierta* finishes, again reflecting the probably lifelike outcome that is recurrent throughout Arlt's oeuvre: both María and Manuel, of course, get sacked.

In 1938 comes *África*. Written after the writer's stay in Morocco, Arlt declares that his main intention is "exaltar la maravillosa fiesta de colorido que vislumbra el turista cuando pone los pies en Marruecos."⁶² According to Mirta Arlt, this is the only play that breaks with Arlt's tradition of depicting a man trapped between two worlds, a man who does not believe in politics and thus is confined to a conformist reality, wanting to comply with socially accepted standards yet despising them at the same time. This may be because Arlt's visit to Africa would shock his senses and inspire many of his stories.⁶³ In Tangier, the first city he visits, Arlt meets Luis Morente, a

⁶² 'Declaraciones de Arlt en vísperas del estreno de *África*' cited by Raúl Larra in *Roberto Arlt el torturado* (Buenos Aires: Ameghino, 1998) p. 107.

⁶³ Saïtta points out that "los relatos africanos reformulan el proyecto literario arltiano con la incorporación de géneros poco transitados en su narrativa anterior como son el relato fantástico, de aventuras y el policial." Saïtta, p. 157.

Spanish spy who tells him about “el sistema de espionaje de la zona.”⁶⁴ Arlt’s first impressions of Africa, however, were disappointing; he had read and seen films about ‘the Orient’ and what he witnessed is not what he expected. He found the place filthy, the products sold in the street cheap. Everything there looked like copies of things you could get anywhere else. On top of that, the women seemed to him ugly and mundane compared to what he had seen in films: “Una de dos. o yo soy la naturaleza más antipoética de la tierra, y por consiguiente, incapacitado para apreciar las delicadas bellezas del planeta, o de lo contrario, los que han escrito sobre la poesía de Oriente, han dejado actuar libremente su fantasía, olvidados totalmente de la realidad.”⁶⁵ Indeed, Arlt had fallen into the trap of ‘Orientalism’.⁶⁶ As Said explains, the Western discourse on the Orient constructs a ‘knowledge’ of the East and a body of power-knowledge relations articulated in the interest of the ‘power’ of the West.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, later on when Arlt arrives in Tetuan, he seems to find what he had been looking for. In one of his *aguafuertes* Arlt describes the crooked streets of a Moorish neighbourhood where “la sensibilidad del occidental se descentra como en el

⁶⁴ Saïtta, p. 152.

⁶⁵ Arlt, ‘¿Dónde está la poesía oriental? Las desdichadas mujeres del Islam. Mugre y hospitalidad’, *El Mundo* (2 August, 1935).

⁶⁶ After private communication with Paul Jordan this line of enquiry will be revisited. Jordan suggested that Arlt is being ironic and “acting out Hollywood”.

⁶⁷ See Said, *Orientalism, Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1991). To support his theory Said uses Foucault’s claim that the ‘truth’ of a discourse depends more on who, when and where something is said it rather than on what is being said. The notion of ‘The Orient’, in Said’s view a European invention, has helped the West define itself by means of constant comparison of contrasting images, ideas and cultures. By setting itself against another culture, European culture (in this case) has gained in strength and identity as it defines itself in comparison with ‘the other’ Oriental culture which is considered a surrogate. Said describes Orientalism as a ‘corporative institution’ for dealing with the Orient. By making statements about a different culture, describing it, authorising views about it, ruling over it, the Western style of dominating the Orient gains authority over it. Using the Foucauldian perspective that discourse equals power, Said describes two main imperial plot structures. Firstly, there is the plot in which the white colonizers succumb to the primal power of the jungle and, mythically, ‘go native’ (Kurtz of both *The Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* illustrates this example). Secondly, there are the stories about the whites who, because of the supposed power of their racial heredity, impose themselves on the jungle and its inhabitants (Tarzan is an example of this classic type of imperialist fiction). In Said’s opinion, these types of narratives tell us more about the desires and anxieties of the culture of imperialism, the one creating the narrative, than they can ever do about the colonized Other.

panorama de un sueño de opio... Me detengo estático a la entrada del barrio moro [...] hileras de casas, tiendas de cambistas, babucheros, vendedores de sedas...⁶⁸

What Arlt puts on stage is exactly that Orientalised idea of the oriental. Although he received some negative reviews, not all of them were entirely negative and Arlt himself seems happy with this play; “estoy contento [...] *África* me gusta.”⁶⁹ *La Prensa* criticises the play criticizing that: “Más que una auténtica pieza de teatro es ésta un folletín más o menos policial que el autor ubica en el norte de África, motivo único que justifica el título.” And they go on to attack Arlt’s whole career as a playwright: “El autor no es dramaturgo, ni a la manera antigua ni tampoco en lo que se ha dado en llamar *Teatro de Vanguardia*.”⁷⁰ This comment is challenged by an article published in *Conducta* by Manuel Pedro González who compares him to Ibsen and vindicates Arlt’s ‘prestigious’ dramaturgy: “Roberto Arlt está probando que es el dramaturgo del teatro de hoy. Ha devuelto al teatro su originaria libertad y toda la frescura y la inocencia [...] Su imaginación es prodigiosa, sus criaturas sorprenden y conmueven...”⁷¹

The last piece Arlt would see on stage is *La fiesta del hierro* (1940), where the author’s views on pacifism and antifascism are clearly stated against the background of the Second World War. In general terms, the play met favourable reviews. All the same, *La Prensa*, following its tradition of hostile appraisal of Arlt, deemed the anti-bellie piece as an inconsistent critique of society: “El asunto, con notas del autor con espíritu de crítica social, a veces ruda, en nada beneficia la pieza.”⁷² Perhaps the review punishes Arlt for his lack of long term commitment or consistent political stance. This tendency of newspapers to pick on Arlt’s political ideas might be

⁶⁸ ‘Tetuán, ciudad de doble personalidad. Me interno en el Barrio Moro. Reminiscencias cinematográficas’ in *El Mundo* (13 August, 1935).

⁶⁹ Arlt’s letter to Ivonne (1937-38), see Saïta, p. 181.

⁷⁰ *La Prensa*, 18 March, 1938.

⁷¹ Manuel Pedro González, ‘África de Arlt’ in *Conducta* (No.1, August, 1938).

⁷² Cited by Castagnino, 1964.

understandable as, even when clearly left-wing, Arlt's principles are never totally engaged with the Communist party and the periodicals he briefly joined and contributed to. Although Arlt only temporarily contributed to *Bandera Roja*, the periodical of the Argentine Communist Party,⁷³ he still projected a great amount of social-conscience oriented topics in most of his oeuvre. On the other hand, not all the reviews are disapproving. Jaime Plaza writing for *La Vanguardia* newspaper considered the piece a modern classic "en el cual los personajes comunes anteriores toman contornos de generalización [...] Y para que la identificación con el asunto sea más perfecta, allí está el ídolo del hierro, el 'Deus ex Machina' de la tragedia clásica y la inefabilidad del castigo."⁷⁴

Considered by Etchenique perhaps the most mature of Arlt's creations, *La fiesta del hierro* is about a prolific weapons manufacturer planning to give a great party to celebrate the anniversary of his successful business. Featuring an unfaithful wife, a son who has compromising pictures of his mother, an unscrupulous servant who blackmails his master's wife, and an ambitious priest, the play concentrates on the last hours of preparation for the party in which a huge iron idol will be set on fire. Tragedy strikes the celebration when, hoping to catch the mother in yet another indiscretion, the boy hides inside the iron piece. The ambitious father, whose son is his only joy, discovers only too late that the boy is burning inside the iron totem. In that frenetic atmosphere of people still celebrating while Mr Grurt faints at the tragic discovery, a man enters the party celebrating that fact that war has been declared, thus securing another year of productive business activity;

UN HOMBRE (entrando precisamente en el mismo momento en que cae el Dr Grunrt). – ¡Victoria! ¡Victoria, señores! ¡La Guerra! ¡Ha estallado la

⁷³See footnote 9 and Jordan 2000.

⁷⁴ Etchenique, p. 110.

Guerra! (Muestra un puñado de telegramas.) Pedido de armas, miren. ¡Piden armas!⁷⁵

Finally, although systematically criticised by *La Prensa*, Arlt's role in the Argentine theatre of the 1930s and 1940s is nothing if not dynamic. As we have tried to demonstrate, Arlt played an active role in the Argentine theatre of his time translating current political and social issues onto the stage. Significantly, critics such as Ordaz believe that Arlt “fué [sic] por autonomasia, el autor del movimiento independiente”⁷⁶ – the core contributor to the Teatro del Pueblo movement. Although Arlt has been accused of lacking political commitment and of forging his name as a playwright by means of adapting his novels to the stage, our analysis suggests that Arlt's contribution to the Teatro del Pueblo movement and to the national stage as a whole was culturally rich and varied as well as historically relevant. Indeed, the historical and cultural relevance of Arlt's dramaturgy is something that will be the main concern in the following chapter where we tackle *Saverio el cruel*, Arlt's most enduring play.

⁷⁵ Arlt, vol. 2, p. 159.

⁷⁶ See footnote nr 7.

CHAPTER 6

Roberto Arlt and the Subversion of Melodrama

I.

As we discussed in chapter 5, the place Arlt achieved in the national theatre is nowadays incontestable. The present chapter will extend the previous section in that we are going to try and unpack the cultural meaning of *Saverio el cruel* in order to prove that Arlt's lack of constant and overt political orientation does not impede his voicing a social critique. Here, we will argue, firstly, that Arlt's 'conversion' to the theatre was very much the product of a particular historical juncture and, secondly, show how Arlt exploits the combination of different theatrical conventions. Subverting melodrama and borrowing from both the *grotesco criollo* and Pirandello's metatheatre technique allow Arlt to render an original, privileged insight into Argentine culture and history. Thus, we will also focus on Arlt's misappropriation and domestication of popular genres for local consumption at a particular historical juncture.

As we have seen, Arlt was heavily criticised for 'abandoning' novel writing in favour of theatre writing.¹ As Isidro Saltzman explains,² the historical context in which Arlt's writing for the stage is embedded might in itself have provided the socio-cultural trigger leading to a switch from one medium to another. Likewise, it is important to note that though Arlt's implicit socio-political critique may be masked there is no doubt that it is also omnipresent. Lastly, we will propose a different reading for *Saverio el cruel* aiming to assess Arlt's legacy to the national theatre and

¹ Saïtta, p. 172.

² See 'Una lectura de la obra dramática de Roberto Arlt en el contexto de la década del 30'. Isidro Saltzman in *Roberto Arlt. Dramaturgia y teatro independiente*, (ed.) Osvaldo Pellettieri (Cuaderno de GETEA No 12, Buenos Aires: Galerna, 2000, pp. 69-83).

his role as “modernizador, de iniciador del teatro moderno en nuestro país”³ particularly in relation to that 1936 piece. If we focus on Arlt’s dramaturgy and understand the notion that theatre as a system always coexists with and reflects social contemporary reality, then Arlt’s theatrical oeuvre offers numerous parallels between recent political and social developments.

In order to illustrate this, let us concentrate on the play that perhaps epitomises Arlt’s socio-political commentary; *Saverio el cruel*, originally published as *Escenas de un grotesco* in 1934.⁴ Indeed, *Saverio el cruel* proved a success. All in all, the play received very good reviews. Most of these would point out the eclectic elements present in the play. Mainstream newspapers such as *La Nación*, describe *Saverio* as a purely avant-garde piece.⁵ Other publications such as *La Prensa*, traditionally more critical of Arlt’s oeuvre in general, reticently highlights Arlt’s “evidente propósito renovador dentro de nuestro ambiente”; although at the same time indicates that the play is “en cierto modo hostil a las normas del teatro tradicional...”⁶ And it is exactly the seemingly disorderly juxtaposition of different styles what would constitute Arlt’s trademark, not only of his novelistic and journalistic career, but of his theatrical oeuvre as well. Emulating his trademark of misappropriation and re-contextualization,⁷ Arlt would fail again and again to respect the rules of the canonical game and thus, would play by a set of norms he himself forged, perhaps also imposed by his eclectic cultural background. We claim that in the case of *Saverio el cruel* in particular Arlt stretched his creativity even further, introducing (perhaps reviving) conventions of melodrama and traces of Grand Guignol, staging a slice of history and assimilating at the same time the sociological implications of the hoax.

³ Pellettieri, 2000, p. 11.

⁴ *Escenas de un grotesco* (*Gaceta de Buenos Aires*, nº2, August 1934; reprinted by Jorge Dubatti, *El cronista comercial*, 3rd and 10th of January, 1997).

⁵ ‘Saverio el cruel en el T. del Pueblo. La obra de Roberto Arlt continua la línea de nuevos moldes’ in *La Nación*, 28th August, 1936.

⁶ ‘*Saverio el cruel* fue estrenada anoche en el Teatro del Pueblo’ in *La Prensa*, 27 August, 1936.

⁷ See General Introduction, p 18.

In the play, Saverio is a stereotypical Italian immigrant who sells butter on commission for a living and seems quite happy with his humble life. Susana, a wealthy young lady, sends for him on the pretext of a business proposal. Hopeful and expectant Saverio arrives at the *estancia* only to meet Susana's close relatives who inform him she has gone mad. At Susana's however, they also have a proposition to make: they want naïve Saverio to take part in the experimental farce the conspirators are organising in the hope of shocking Susana back to sanity. This implies Saverio's 'playing the part' of a Colonel, as Susana believes she is a princess whose kingdom has been taken over by this tyrant. In the therapeutic farce, the Colonel's head would be severed; one of them would get a real human head to give the charade a realistic touch, and, thus causing Susana the shock she would need to be cured. Unaware of all this, Saverio reluctantly accepts, and they could not be more amused, anticipating Saverio's public humiliation —the farce was to take place in front of more friends at a fancy-dress party. To their surprise, Saverio is tipped off and disgraces them all when he confronts Susana with the truth. The change of fate comes when Susana, who in actual life has really gone mad, shoots Saverio when he rejects her, both as a phoney Colonel and as a real man.

Although at times the achievement of the play seems all too obvious, commonplaces and sources easily spotted, perhaps the originality of *Saverio el cruel* lies in the fact that Arlt's play can be read as being the result of an unlikely combination of popular and highbrow traditions. Arlt's exploitation of theatrical conventions become evident: in order to denounce the rigid social distribution of roles, one can see Arlt's borrowing of the rules of the *grotesco criollo* to depict Saverio as the stereotypical Italian immigrant of the twenties.⁸ Drawing from Ibsen's conventions as well as Ibsen's concerns with the social and moral restrictions of

⁸ For the national and international context of the play see Golluscio de Montoya, Eva 'Procedimientos citacionales de una farsa argentina de los años 30 (*Saverio el cruel* de Roberto Arlt)' in *El teatro y los días. Estudios sobre el teatro argentino e iberoamericano* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1997, pp. 234-243).

bourgeois society, the protagonists' characters are developed on as the play moves towards its climax 'fooling' the audiences' expectations. As a result, neither is Saverio as naïve as he first appeared, soon growing into his part of tyrannical Colonel, to the point of having a real guillotine made to secure the realism of the charade, nor is Susana as in control or sane as she originally appeared. In this way, Arlt's trenchant commentary is rendered reflecting his conviction that the individuals' position is not an inherent condition but the result of a specific social order leading to unjust treatment and alienation.

Also central to Arlt's dramaturgy is Pirandello's technique of theatre inside the theatre. Mirta Arlt points out that, in *Saverio el cruel*, Susana suffers from a "problema pirandeliiano de enmarcar su personalidad con otra personalidad."⁹ Although as a device metatheatre is not Pirandello's invention¹⁰ –it can actually be traced back to the Renaissance (Corneille's *L'Illusion Comique*, 1635-1636) or even further back to Aristophanes' parodies and Euripides' *The Bacchae*– it is Pirandello who is especially associated with this technique. This is particularly so because of the way in which Pirandello examines the degrees of reality of a piece of theatre, its internal world and the reality of its context. Plays such as *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), *Henry IV* (1921) and *Tonight We Improvise* (1929) seem to

⁹ Arlt 1968, p. 34.

¹⁰ See Abel, *Metatheatre: a New View of Dramatic Form* (N.Y.: Hill and Young, 1963). Abel coined the term metatheatre and claims that 'tragedy' in the Greek sense does not exist anymore. This would even apply to Shakespeare. With the exception of *Macbeth*, most of his tragedies are metaplays. Death in Greek tragedies is only justified on stage if it is destined, necessary or morally inevitable, thus Greek tragedies are subjected to an inflexible supernatural order. Abel believes justifying his characters is Shakespeare's dramaturgical weakness. Thus, Hamlet's act of revenge is validated as an act of universal justice. Similarly, characters are continuously trying to write their own play (plot, fate) and they "dramatize" each other. The Ghost casts Hamlet into role of avenger, himself driven to "writing his own play" as his unfortunate predicament has been authored by his brother ("the reaction of Hamlet is that of man with playwright's consciousness who has just been told to be an actor, and is now determined to make an actor of the very playwright who had cast him the undesired role" 1963, p. 47). Likewise, Polonius writes his own play, his children are the actors; Claudius (aided by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) also plots another intrigue around Hamlet, later instigating the duel with Hamlet and Leartes. In this way, all, the Ghost, Claudius and Polonius are dramatists. Hamlet has to rewrite the melodrama he has been placed in (Ibid, p. 51). Later on, Barthes (1977) extended the the idea of 'death of the author' and 'death of a playwright' in the light of post-socialism in relation to anti-Thatcherite British playwrights. Barthes defines metatheatre in opposition to tragedy on the basis of two main postulates; 'the world is a stage' and 'life is a dream', drawn from Shakespeare and Calderón respectively.

epitomise this concept. As we will see, Arlt exploits this technique in most of his plays not only because metatheatre offers the possibility of introducing an additional dimension to the world of the play but also because it gives room for ideological comment.¹¹

What we propose here, thus, is to leave aside other perhaps more traditional interpretations of the play and focus on a different reading of *Saverio el cruel*.¹² At the centre of this new interpretation we find France and the French Revolution, where melodrama, madness and the guillotine play, just as they do in *Saverio*, a major part.

II. *Saverio el cruel* and the *golpe*

Keith Michael Barker, one of the chief exponents of the ‘political culture’ historical approach notes that:

¹¹ Dušanka Radosavljević Heaney, *Metatheatre as a political tool in Yugoslav drama in the 1980s and 1990s*, Doctoral thesis, University of Hull, Jan 2003. Although her thesis is mainly focused on metatheatre as a political tool in relation to the socio-political context of Yugoslav dramaturgy of the 1980s and 1990s, Heaney proposes that the term metatheatre could be used to refer to a number of dramaturgical techniques that may include amongst others, a play-within-the-play, the featuring of an illusionary world within the play which is presented as a real one, exploitation of the nature of theatre itself (through commentary or parody as in Pirandello, through incident remark as in Shakespeare or by featuring actors as main character as in Chekhov’s *The Seagull* and Sartre’s *Kean* to name but a few.). Either for technical or aesthetic motivations the exploiting of metatheatre as a device occurs for various reasons. Either for ideology or theme, or a combination of both, Heaney claims metatheatre is most commonly used as means of: A- adding suspension of disbelief and reinforcing the realism of the outer play by drawing attention of the inner play (e.g. *Hamlet*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*); B- Amusing the audience through parody or through incidental references to theatre within a play (Noel Coward’s plays); C- Use the inner play as a hypothesis for discussion in the outer play (Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*). In this third category we could include Arlt’s *El fabricante de fantasmas*. Lastly, metatheatre can be used for D- dismantling the theatrical illusion at the end of the play through commentary, or as a means of conclusion or epilogue (Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Corneille’s *L’ Illusion Comique*); and E- preventing suspension of disbelief and theatrical illusion altogether by continually drawing attention to the theatre’s own artificiality (as in Brecht’s use of the narrator and the V-effect).

¹² In the introduction to the *Teatro completo de Roberto Arlt*, Mirta Arlt claims that in Arlt’s theatre works we can trace the influence of Dostoevsky (particularly *Crime and Punishment*), and through the Russian realist, we can trace “la dominante sombra de Nietzsche, con su doctrina del superhombre”. According to M. Arlt, alongside Nietzsche we find the influence of Poe’s “paradójico deleite por las [sic] conductas morbosa” and Freud with his need to unmask the subconscious (Arlt, vol. 1, p. 9). Talking about Arlt’s theatre oeuvre Mirta Arlt recognises three stages. The first corresponds to his experimental phase. This would be Arlt’s first attempt to write theatre and break from narrative, showing a glimpse of the “dialéctica del traslado” – which translates on the stage by placing the characters in a world of fiction. *Prueba de amor* is an example of this first phase in which the protagonists are presented with a dramatic situation. The second stage is represented by *300 millones* and *El fabricante de fantasmas*. Here we find his ‘dialéctica del traslado’ at its peak. The third stage corresponds to *África* where we can see an attempt to ‘dominate a storyline’ as Mirta Arlt puts it and to experiment with a plotline rather than with the previously recurrent psychological side.

If politics, broadly construed, is the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make one upon another, then political culture may be understood as the set of discourses and practices characterising that activity in any given community.¹³

As Bernardette Fort points out, the introduction of the 'political culture' concept has radically transformed the way in which we reread and revalorise the fictional in its manifestation as symbolic field. Fort goes on to explain that, "Accepting the premise that a society largely estranged from political concerns and power during the *Ancien Régime* had to invent not only a new political language but also new forms of action and representation, scholars have directed their efforts to tracking the signs of and manifestations of political consciousness in all nooks and crannies of symbolic practice."¹⁴ Thus, looking at all highbrow and popular manifestations such as songs, caricatures, literature, dress codes, icons and emblems, ritual and civic ceremonies, might give us a clearer picture of a particular historic setting.

Theatre, of course, is no exception to this rule and could very well prove important in order to construct a politico-cultural picture of a certain epoch. Thus, in the light of the historical backdrop of the piece in question, a first reading of *Saverio el cruel* could indisputably be allegorical, namely Arlt's attempt at putting history on stage for a popular audience: *Saverio el cruel* was first performed six years after the Uriburu coup. Despite the fact that the coup happened on 6 September 1930 and this

¹³ Since *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, (ed.) Barker (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987) was published, Barker has recently reaffirmed and expanded the definition on 'political culture' in *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 4-11). For an eloquent overview of politicisation of French culture also see Roger Chartier's *Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990, pp 25-28 and 167-203). Barker, p. 6.

¹⁴ See Fort, 'The French Revolution and the making of fictions' in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, (ed.) Lynn Hunt (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, pp 3-32). Fort, p. 13.

play opened only a few days earlier to mark the exact anniversary, we understand that the timing is particularly crucial in the light of the historical memory of the Nation.¹⁵ It is hard to overlook the possibility that Arlt might be mimicking the historical events that have spilled so much blood in Argentina. Indeed, the 1930s are known as the ‘*década infame*’ (‘infamous decade’) and the *caudillo* Saverio personifies imitates the fascism so much in vogue not only in Argentina but also in Europe. Before trying to tackle the question of what impact *el golpe* (the coup) had on Arlt’s stage work we cannot overlook the change that *el golpe* had in the general culture of the country.

Nationally, General José Félix Uriburu’s 1930 coup d’état inaugurated a long, violent period in our history, one in which the armed forces would, sadly, be the protagonist form. But this militarization initiated by Uriburu not only triggered decades of violent coups; it also shaped Argentine society and culture. Salzman comments that “resulta difícil negar que el desfile que los cadetes del Colegio Militar y de la Escuela de Comunicaciones efectuaron desde San Martín hasta la Plaza de Mayo el 6 de Septiembre de 1930 cambió de modo definitivo la conformación de la sociedad argentina y que tuvo efectos determinantes en el campo intelectual.”¹⁶ To understand this, it helps to bear in mind that the central political figure of the first three decades of the twentieth century was Hipólito Yrigoyen. A sullen *caudillo*, better at giving speeches at the barricades than in addressing the whole nation from the balcony of the Casa Rosada (Argentinean Presidential Palace), Yrigoyen was not a particularly flamboyant president, politically speaking.¹⁷ The coming of General

¹⁵ There seems to be dissent amongst critics and biographers when referring to the exact date *Saverio el cruel* opened. For Silvia Saïtta (2000) this play opened on August, 26th. Mirta Arlt, on the other hand (1968) tells us Saverio was first performed on September 4th and Nelle (2001) claims it was on September 6th. In any case, give or take a week, the timing was significant for the political reasons previously stated.

¹⁶ Salzman, pp. 69-83.

¹⁷ Born in 1852, lawyer and politician Yrigoyen was the first constitutional president elected by popular vote in 1916. It was the first time in Argentine history that an incoming president replaced his predecessor, Victorino de la Plaza, the very day of the presidential ceremony. In his first administration (1916-22) Yrigoyen and his supporters of the Partido Radical in Congress were neutral during the First World War. They also tried to pass laws regulating labour but these reforms proved insufficient to keep appeased labourers and a general strike brought his government down. Re-elected in 1928 (57.4

Uriburu, as Salzman points out, “transforma abruptamente la fisonomía del poder.”¹⁸ An essential part of Uriburu’s irruption into power consisted of a visual and physical exaltation of the armed forces he used to exploit repression and exercise censorship. And that is something the people seemed to notice from the very beginning. Sánchez Sorondo comments how the whole of Buenos Aires walked with the cadets as they marched towards the Casa Rosada that day: “... entre apretadas filas de hombres, mujeres, ancianos y niños que vitoreaban y arrojaban flores a su paso, irrumpían en la columna revolucionaria, quebrando la rigidez militar al punto de convertirla en una oleada clamorosa...”¹⁹ In this way, the military were granted central stage in the republic’s drama.

Observing the new role of the military in the 1930s, Salzman remarks that they were very different from what the ‘theatre of politics’ had been offering so far. In contrast to Yrigoyen’s lack of ostentatious militarism, the new regime proved more solemn, rigid and authoritarian in the way they manifested themselves, and certainly, conducted themselves; after imposing their presence, they recited their mottos with grave voices and paraded in spotless uniforms. Like Saverio, they aimed to perpetuate themselves on stage and in order to do so they called upon histrionics to exploit a pompous discourse and a bombastic gesture. Significantly, Rouquié calls them “personajes en busca de autor”,²⁰ precisely because they seemed to improvise, “ninguno sabía lo que iba a hacer.”²¹ Associating the military with theatricality thus is not altogether uncommon. Indeed, as Salzman highlights, we only need to think about Adolf Hitler’s theatrical rise to power in the Reich in 1933. In a national context, the Legión Cívica Argentina shared the same taste for theatricality the Nazi regime had.

votes) at 78, Yrigoyen returned to government. Accused of leading a corrupt administration and with the conservative opposition claiming his senility, his second period in office was brought to standstill, which gave way to a great depression in 1929. This debilitated Yrigoyen’s office further and gave way to a rather popularly supported military coup in 1930. Yrigoyen died in Buenos Aires in 1933.

¹⁸ Salzman, p. 71.

¹⁹ See Matías Sánchez Sorondo, ‘El 6 de setiembre de 1930’, in *Revista de Historia*, No. 3, 1958.

²⁰ See Alain Rouquié, *Poder militar y sociedad política en la Argentina I* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1981)

²¹ Rouquié, p. 223.

In fact, Rouquié's description of the seditious movement is closer to a play chronicle than a historical account.²² Thus, it may come as no surprise that the influence of that militarization found its way into Argentine society and lived amongst us almost till the end of the century.

This, of course, may also be a repercussion of the increasing militarization of Europe. Salzman claims that Arlt's abandonment of narrative in favour of the theatre was fundamentally triggered by the explosion of militarism both in Argentina and in the world generally.²³ Europe witnessed a series of militarizations with Mussolini, Hitler and Franco, and later on with the Second World War. Nationally, the 1930 coup against Yrigoyen's second administration brought about changes that still have cultural and social repercussions in Argentina today. In the present case, the cultural break triggered by the 1930 overthrow of democracy had a collateral effect on the Argentine stage. In Arlt's particular case, his trip to Europe would prove decisive "para la politización de su escritura dramática"²⁴ as Arlt had attentively witnessed and chronicled the build up to the civil war in Spain, and back in Argentina (May 1936) he could not but have felt the exacerbated air of fascism that seemed to be haunting the country.²⁵ All this becomes apparent in *Saverio el cruel*.

Perhaps emulating what was happening off stage, namely the change in people's attitude towards the military, Saverio's change of heart towards his role as dictator also happens dramatically as he soon gets used to his part. Mirroring history on stage, we see that although at the beginning of the play Saverio declares his

²² Salzman also points out that this new pleasure the military found in anything theatrical extended to the rest of the country. The provisional Governor of Córdoba, for instance, addressed the local garrison from the stage of the Theatre Rivera Indarte (2000, p. 72). On the other hand, talking about the gala at the Colón Theatre and the homage to the revolutionaries at the Jockey Club and Progreso club, *La Nación* newspaper comments 'En un teatro se monta una revista titulada *Viva la libertad*, cuyo apoteótico final presenta frente a una Casa Rosada de cartón a un Uriburu más olímpico y bigotudo que el verdadero, rodeado por encantadoras bailarinas disfrazadas de cadetes (título del cuadro *Son los cadetes de la Argentina*)' (*La Nación* 17-09-1930).

²³ Salzman, p. 70.

²⁴ Sylvia Saïta quoted in Salzman 2000, p. 81.

²⁵ See Arlt's *Aguafuertes madrileñas: presagios de una Guerra civil* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1999); and Rita Gnutzmann's 'Roberto Arlt, cronista de España' in *Río de la Plata*, No 15/16; Actas del IV Congreso Internacional del CELCIRP: "Encuentros y desencuentros" (1992/1996), pp. 91-99.

disapproval of the military (“Es que yo no soy actor, señorita, además, los coroneles nunca me han sido simpáticos.”),²⁶ he goes on to take his role very seriously—ultimately Saverio is also corrupted by power and finds himself very comfortable with his new militaristic identity.

As we have pointed out, exploiting metatheatrical devices would provide Arlt with the perfect tool for political commentary. Thus, Saverio assumes not only the appearance of a Colonel but also the discourse of a dictator frantically performing his new role in front of Simona, the maid, on the improvised stage of his *pensión* (“General, que fusilen a estos atrevidos”).²⁷ This, in turn, would constitute the counter-discourse of the noble shepherd played by Juan. According to Foster,²⁸ this represents, at least on a first reading, the semiotic space Pedro claims is essential to shock Susana back to sanity. In this way, we see how Saverio accomplishes ‘his orders’ to the letter. Saverio considers himself “el hombre de Estado indispensable.”²⁹ In doing this, he not only impersonates a national despot but he also evokes Mussolini and Hitler in his discourse, declaring that “nuestra época abunda de tantos ejemplos de hombres que no eran nada y terminaron siéndolo todo...”³⁰ Consequently, it does not come as a complete surprise to the audience to recognize in the ‘new’ Saverio, the one behind the mask, allusions to local dictators. Equally recognizable is the Nazi propagandistic discourse, at times quite explicit according to Nelle,³¹ echoing a commonplace of Nazi ‘Butter zu Kanonen’ (literally, “canons over butter”), a recurrent metaphor Hitler used in his speeches.³² Thus, Saverio justifies his speedy transformation into the totalitarian Colonel, and fervent partisanship, when he

²⁶ Arlt, vol. II, p 55.

²⁷ Arlt, p 58.

²⁸ David William Foster, “La teatralización de la masculinidad en Saverio el cruel” (in *Roberto Arlt: dramaturgia y teatro independiente*, (ed) Osvaldo Pellettieri (Buenos Aires: Galerna, Cuaderno de GETEA No 12, 2000, pp 35-42).

²⁹ Arlt, p. 61.

³⁰ Arlt, p. 65.

³¹ Nelle, p. 134.

³² See Golluscio de Montoya, p. 237.

declares that “se toma el poder por quince días y se queda uno veinte años.”³³ By sentencing the colonel to ‘public’ execution (his decapitation would take place during the party) Arlt in effect, seems to introduce a contemporary social twist, translating the historical narrative of *el golpe* onto the stage.

Here we propose a further, somewhat deeper socio-political reading. As we have already discussed, it has been argued that Arlt lacked the cultural background to produce highbrow pieces. It is perhaps because he does not have the historical-cultural constraints that prevent him from doing so that Arlt has the freedom to tackle a wide range of ideas and models which range from melodrama and *grotesco criollo* to metatheatre, popular science and Grand Guignol, to name but a few.³⁴ This could perhaps explain why Arlt’s plays, being well written (that is well written for stage), therefore may not read particularly well. In that respect, Arlt is very much a playwright of his time, for the historical frame outside the play becomes an integral part of what happens on stage. It is here that we find that melodrama becomes an essential tool for Arlt’s combination of politics and popular elements.

³³ Arlt, p. 60.

³⁴ Conceived in the nineteenth century, the Grand Guignol emerges from the groundbreaking work of Andre Antoine and his fellow naturalist radicals at the Théâtre Libre. By definition, it emerges as a complex and seemingly contradictory mixture of theatrical traditions and genres characterized by its use of both horror and comic plays, incorporating melodrama and naturalism, and going on to reflect the influence of Expressionism and film. Yet, as Hand and Wilson point out, ‘the theatre of Grand Guignol always remained a *popular* and, more crucially, a *modern* theatre.’ (Hand and Wilson, *Grand-Guignol, The French Theatre of Horror*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002, p. x). In his *The Horror Genre: from Belzberg to Blair Witch* Paul Wells points out that ‘As the nineteenth century passed into the twentieth, this prevailing moral and ethical tension between the individual and the socio-political order was profoundly affected by some of the most significant shifts in social and cultural life. This effectively reconfigured the notion of evil in the horror text in a way that moved beyond issues of fantasy and ideology and into the realms of material existence and an overt challenge to establish cultural value systems (London: Wallflower Press, 2000. p. 3). As a realist form, the Grand Guignol never leaves the path of the Zola-inspired naturalism, although it does push ‘the human subject into monstrosity, extrapolating, as it were, *la bête humaine* into *le monstre humain*’ (Hand and Wilson 2002, x). According to André de Lorde, the psychological motivation of the Grand Guignol protagonist/antagonist is the potential monster, that within us (see the preface to *La Galerie des monsters* (1928) quoted in Pierron, Agnès, *Le Grand Guignol: Le théâtre des peurs de la belle époque*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1995). The plots, of both comedies and horror plays, obsessed with death, sex and insanity are exacerbated by the combination of grotesque coincidence or haunting irony and are aimed at primal instincts and unpredictable manias.

III. Arlt and the Melodramatic Imagination

According to Peter Brooks, melodrama, in effect a form of realism and the ordinary, is in fact the staging of a heightened and hyperbolic drama, making reference to “pure and polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation.”³⁵ Characters, placed at the intersection of primal moral forces, seem to enact the very clash of these forces. Often used derogatively to refer to cheap and banal melodrama (namely soaps), the term covers a mode of high emotionalism and stark moral conflict that is neither comic, nor tragic in persons, structure, intent, or effect. Nevertheless, as Brooks points out, the term “melodrama” refers to a range of both high and low examples in any literary field: “the melodramatic mode of conception and representation may appear to be the very process of reaching a fundamental drama of the moral life and finding the term to express it.”³⁶ Brooks explains that melodrama is about “psychic engagement with the ordinary transactions of urban and suburban life. The essential point may be that melodrama, even when it starts from the everyday—as it does in domestic and familiar melodrama—refuses to content itself with the repressions, the tonings-down, the half-articulations, the accommodations, and the disappointments of the real.”³⁷ Brooks goes on to describe what he terms “the melodramatic imagination”. After studying a number of authors, particularly Balzac and Henry James, Brooks uses the adjective ‘melodramatic’ in relation to “the mode of their dramatizations, especially the extravagance of certain representations, and the intensity of moral claim impinging on their characters’

³⁵ See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination, Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, reprint New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. ix xii). Melodrama nowadays is a term used in a number of fields that may not necessarily be theatre-exclusive. Apart from literature it has grown to be central to other artistic forms. Melodrama has become an issue of modern painting (in the works of Robert Longo for example) but above all film studies. Indeed, melodrama was beginning to be talked about back in the 1940s and 1950s, becoming a key concept in the critical discussion of films, particularly so when we refer to Hollywood of the 1940s-1950s and in the New German cinema.

³⁶ Brooks describes proper melodrama, that is stage melodrama, as ‘classical’ melodrama, first established in France in the nineteenth century. ‘Classical melodrama’ constitutes a fully coherent theatrical mode. What he finds there is intense emotional and ethical drama “based on a manichaeistic struggle of good and evil” (1985, p. 13).

³⁷ Brooks, p. ix.

consciousness.”³⁸ As first used by Balzac in his first major novel *La Peau de chagrin* (‘Each of the spectators looked for a *drama* in the fate of a single gold piece, perhaps the final scene of a noble life’),³⁹ the term seems to condense the kind of pressure the narrator exercises upon things. Brooks claims that it is in Balzac that we witness the creation of drama “—an exciting, excessive, parabolic story—from the banal stuff of reality.”⁴⁰ The narrative voice questions and hypothesis the surface of things driving the reader to what lies beneath, the true spirit of drama:

The characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings [...]. They assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions... The world is subsumed by an underlying manichaeism, and the narrative creates the excitement of its drama by putting us in touch with the conflict of good and evil played out under the surface of things—just as a description of the surfaces of the modern metropolis pierces through to a mythological realm where the imagination can find a habitat for its play with large moral entities.⁴¹

Furthermore, for Brooks, the melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the ‘moral occult’ (as most of the times the true subject is not easily established because relationships are often hidden and personages are usually masked).⁴² It is through the metaphorical use of the things and gestures of the ‘real world’ of social life that Brooks claims Balzac and James (later followed by a number of other authors) exploit the realms of spiritual reality and unveil latent moral meaning.

Balzac did an apprenticeship in *roman noir*, nourished himself with Gothic novel, melodrama and frenetic adventure story, and invented cops-and-robbers fiction. These are models that insist that reality can be exciting, can

³⁸ Brooks, *ibid.*

³⁹ Honoré de Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*, in *La Comédie Humaine*, ed Marcel Bouteron (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1955-56) 9: 11-12, as cited in Brooks, p. 2.

⁴⁰ Brooks, p. 2.

⁴¹ Brooks, p. 3.

⁴² Brooks, p. 4.

be equal to the demands of imagination, which in Balzac's case meant primarily the moral imagination, at play with large basic ethical conflicts.⁴³

Thus, with melodramatic imagination, gestures become the words that speak about social intercourse; they become the vehicle of a metaphor suggesting another kind of reality. "If with James we are tempted to believe that gestures receive their charge from social manners [...] we find that, on the contrary, social signification is only the merest starting point for an immense construction of connotation."⁴⁴ Gesture is read as containing such meanings because it is postulated as the metaphorical approach to what cannot be said. The more elusive the tenor of the metaphor (the more difficult it becomes to put one's finger on the nature of the spiritual reality), the more highly charged is the vehicle, the more strained with pressure to suggest a meaning beyond.

Indeed, melodrama could essentially be read as a socio-political conflict showing the audience the difference between popular values and aristocratic values. Popular values revolve around truth, honesty and communion, while aristocratic morals are basically corrupt and hypocritical. Central to melodramatic conflict is the recognition of certain standard characteristics. Conflict, and the drama of persecuted innocence exist in classical melodrama not merely for the sake of pathos and thrills, and the *coups de théâtre* are not extrinsic to the moral issues as melodrama conceives them. Typically, melodrama "not only employs virtue persecuted as a source of its dramaturgy, but also tends to become the dramaturgy of virtue misprized and eventually recognized."⁴⁵ It is essential, then, that both virtue and evil are made clearly recognisable as the stereotypes have to be unequivocal.

What we find very interesting indeed is that in the case of *Saverio el cruel* Arlt seems to be subverting the genre. Arlt's personal twist lies in the inversion of the

⁴³ Brooks, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Brooks, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Brooks, p. 27.

‘traditional’ melodramatic roles of good and evil. As Brooks explains, typically, the aesthetics and ethics of classic melodrama revolve around the “homage to virtue” and when necessary, “peripety and confrontation are used so that virtue can be highlighted.”⁴⁶ The standard structure of melodrama differs to that of tragedy or comedy. In melodrama, plays typically open with a presentation of virtue and innocence, or rather presentation of virtue as innocence (it does not begin at the point of crisis as tragedy does) moving to the presentation of menace, which places virtue in a situation of peril; ambiguities or enigmas hover over the world, threatening virtue. For the rest of the play evil appears to reign triumphant, dictating the moral coordinates of reality. Virtue is expelled, fallen and above all silenced by the structure of family relationship (or societal structure in the case of Arlt, particularly when we look at the power roles in *Saverio*). Recovery of virtue will often depend upon recognition of error by those in position of power, which is dependent on recognition of evil. A third act almost always includes battles, duels or explosions offering violent ‘acting out’ of virtue’s liberation from evil. This could be the melodramatic version of the tragic catharsis. With the victory of virtue, the old society reaffirms its values.

We could consider that melodrama is about confirmation and restoration of virtue. Why then do we propose that Arlt could be subverting the genre? We believe this to be the case because we have observed that in Arlt’s dramaturgy it is mainly the man who suffers from that ‘deflowering of virtue’ which is the part of female protagonists in the case of traditional melodrama (although Brooks points out that in classical French melodrama, the heroine need not be virgin: chastity is not at issue, for it is moral sentiment that needs to be chaste). In melodramatic structure, the world is made of bipolar contrasts and clashes; good and evil are present as permanent and irreducible terms, and it is the role of the female protagonist to voice the need for a

⁴⁶ Brooks, p. 28. See also Robert B. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968) p. 85 and Eric Bentley ‘Melodrama’ in *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1964) pp. 195-218.

more democratic morality (villains are only too often tyrants and oppressors). By contrast, we find that it is Saverio who represents the democratisation of morality and virtuous values of the ‘new’ working class, that of the struggling immigrant in the big city. Thus Susana (and her class) would stand for social evil; Saverio represents the virtuous class, in the sense that he represents the ‘purity’, innocence and morality of the immigrant (hard) working class.

So far we have seen that central to melodrama is the description of the modern metropolis piercing through to a mythological realm where imagination can find a habitat for its play with large moral entities. Another essential element of the melodramatic mode is that, in large measure, it exists to locate and to articulate the ‘moral occult’. Could Susana’s body have then become the place for the inscription of emotional messages that cannot be verbalised? When we analyse the play in question, it becomes clear that Saverio might be the most virtuous, but is not the only protagonist; Susana’s role is crucial to the triggering of the farce, as it is she who actually comes up with the idea of duping him. Exploiting her moral universe and her class supremacy, as we often see that in melodrama “those that have power ... use it to hurt”,⁴⁷ Susana uses her authority to amuse herself and her social peers. Thus, the play could be read as a tale where Saverio’s values of virtue clash with Susana’s (who epitomises the lack of moral values of her class). Following Foster’s suggestion that Susana constitutes the very point around which the representations of masculinity take place⁴⁸ it becomes clear that the part Susana plays is not just the relatively innocent yet cruel bourgeois lady who seeks entertainment at any cost. Thus, Arlt may prove successful in turning melodrama into something new. Framing melodrama within a somewhat more sophisticated technique, that of metatheatre, we see how Arlt overcomes that weakness of plot so characteristic of melodrama and compensates for

⁴⁷ Brooks, p. 44.

⁴⁸ For humiliation and masculinity see Foster 2000.

the acting and the significant exploitation of other popular devices such as the grand guignolesque public decapitation on stage.

In this respect, there are two episodes we find crucial for the effective development of the play, both represented by two very significant, powerful and popular symbols; both borrowed from France; both domesticated for local consumption. The first one is madness. The second, the guillotine. The former is fuelled by elements of popular science, namely the fact that madness can be cured by shock. Aimed to ‘harmlessly’ entertain the bourgeois party, it triggers the farce, and with it Saverio’s transformation. The latter transforms an inoffensive hoax into a cruel, bloody episode with very clear political connotations. What we find interesting indeed is that the icons Arlt chooses are perhaps the two most powerful images of the French Revolution. If we bear in mind that, significantly, melodrama has been described as the voice of the French Revolution,⁴⁹ we might wonder whether Susana could represent not only her social class but the country itself. Could she stand for *La Patria*,⁵⁰ i.e. the Nation? And in that sense, could Saverio constitute that threat to do justice for the people? Furthermore, could Susana’s madness symbolically represent the desacralization of the rich in favour of the people?

In all revolutions, particularly in the French Revolution, women become symbolic of class hatred. As feminist historians have been at pains to demonstrate, Marie-Antoinette was hated even more than Louis XVI himself. Indeed, an entire campaign, intent on her desacralization, was carefully orchestrated against her.⁵¹

⁴⁹ A view put forward notably by Charles Nodier in his preface to the *Théâtre choisi* of Guilbert de Pixérécourt (4 vol. Paris and Nancy: chez l’auteur, 1841-43). Pixérécourt (1773-1844), a prolific playwright, is generally remembered as one of the main architects of melodrama. Significantly, the genre came to the fore during the period of the French Revolution.

⁵⁰ In Argentine culture, as well as in French, the Nation is represented as an iconic female figure, almost always with wavy long hair and a flag of the country in her hands, in the style of the renowned painting by Delacroix. So significant is French iconography in Argentine history that from 1881 until 1896 the peso coins (all, the gold, silver and copper pieces) had on one side the coat of arms of the nation; on the other, the head of the famous Liberty designed by French artist Eugène André Oudiné (1810-1887).

⁵¹ After being tried and found guilty of crimes against the Republic, Marie-Antoinette was executed in 1793. As Brooks notes, these crimes against the Republic “were made to appear inextricably linked to

Significantly, such campaigns, which through their use of pornography and innuendo are specifically intended to wound and humiliate, are less successful when directed against male rules.

Indeed, representation of the body politic— the fact that political organization can be imagined as a body— leaves open the potential to associate it with the female, thus admitting erotic connotations. The role played by women regarding the representation of the political body depends, of course, on the fact that just as the legitimacy of the royal line depends on the purity of the queen, so too the health of any particular social class depends on the reliability of its female members.

Still, why target Susana and not, say, the Colonel who, as we know, will be the key one executed? On the one hand, this could of course be interpreted as the element used by Arlt in subverting melodramatic conventions as it implies the inversion of the melodramatic grammar. On the other hand, as discussed earlier, women have played a crucial role throughout time in discussing the representation of the political body (legitimacy of the royal line and the health of any particular social class depended on them). Men have traditionally occupied a central role in power, but many of their social and political relations rely in turn on their relationship with women's bodies. Although women have been imagined as dangerous when meddling with public domains (essentially, the campaigns against Marie-Antoinette can be seen as a protest against the notion not only of queenship but of women occupying a public place), social and political order cannot be reproduced without women. This was particularly true in France where the Salic Law meant that though women could be wives of kings or mothers of regents acting in an advisory capacity, unlike in Britain, they could never assume power in their own name. The fact that women play a crucial

her sexual immorality" (See 'The Revolutionary Body' in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, (ed) Lynn Hunt, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, pp. 35-54). Not only was the dethroned Queen a conspirator against her adopted country, she was also accused of 'insatiable "uterine furors"' and of attempting to corrupt the Bourbon males, both the King, her husband, and the *Dauphin*, her son. (Hunt, p. 38)

role in reproduction, and thus in the transmission of power, has ensured that their representation in art and literature could only be multivocal. This multivalence of the female body was especially striking in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it was a time of birth of democratic and mass politics, which was accompanied by a persistent set of issues about women's place. In European history, the damaging potential of this association was further increased by the political identification of royalism with the body of the king, the body of the latter often claimed to have magical qualities. The guillotine, however, focuses our attention not on the complete body but on the head severed by the blade. The ideology behind decapitation was "...to put to death a representation of the body politic in which the head (of state) incarnated the nation in his own body. The guillotine separated this head from its body [...] systematically deprived it from the body of its representative value."⁵² The French discussion of women's role in the public sphere is perhaps epitomised during the French Revolution as it brought Marie Antoinette's private life into the public arena, which, in turn, provoked a major rethinking of conceptions of the body politics and French art and literature pushed the issues of gender boundaries and their implications for power relationships into nineteenth century debates.

Throughout history, particularly the periods analysed in Anne Deneys' 'The Political Economy of the Body in the *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* of Choderlos de Laclos',⁵³ women's bodies were at the centre of male debate about social tensions.⁵⁴ But it is not only in the political arena where women became controversial and notorious. In both the criminal and medical field women turned out to be much talked

⁵² Daniel Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Terror*, (tr.) Christopher Miller (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1989), p. 80.

⁵³ See *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, (ed) Lynn Hunt (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) pp. 41-63.

⁵⁴ Where in the earlier periods the eroticised aristocratic woman (prostitute, queen) represented a specifically political corruption and decay, by the end of the nineteenth century writers were much more concerned with prostitution and eroticism as examples of the commercialisation of all human relations. According to Brooks, what Zola depicts in his novels is mainly the female body as explicitly related to the machinery of commerce and industrialism See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in the Narrative* (New York: Random House, 1984, pp143-70).

about and publicly debated. Through hysteria and hypnotism ‘mad women’ captured the public imagination and divided the medical community.

In ‘Women, Hysteria and Hypnotism’ Harris describes how the Parisian *Belle Époque* produced several cases involving the issue of hypnotic suggestion, in which women, in particular, were seen as acting unconsciously under the powerful influence of masterful men.⁵⁵ These *affaires* not only captured public imagination; they were also taken seriously in court and had great press coverage. Furthermore, they commanded professional attention from eminent physicians, lawyers and social theorists, hence impinging criminological debate.⁵⁶

While the initial focus of hypnotic investigation centred on medicine, the impact of experimental discoveries led to of a more general political and philosophical debate.⁵⁷ Hypnosis in the 1880’s and 1890’s was at the confluence of almost every major cultural trend, forming an important aspect of the ‘revolt against rationalism’ and providing experimental proof for the need to revise social and political thinking. Such esoteric theorizing was not cut off from the day-to-day sphere of the *fin de siècle* cultural life.⁵⁸ It was often through the vehicle of medico-legal debate that highbrow formulations were clarified and analysed. Although there are no

⁵⁵ See Ruth Harris, *Murders and Madness. Medicine, Law and Society in the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 155-208.

⁵⁶ The case of Gabrielle Bompard for instance was far from being the only one of this type to arouse such controversy in the 1880’s. Other examples demonstrate that there was a strong tendency to see unconscious suggestion and male domination as in some way present when women behaved in what were considered particularly dangerous or reprehensible ways. Indeed, the more sensational the case, the more likely that hypnotism would be proposed as an explanation. In all cases, the most prestigious medical mandarins and social commentators went to immense lengths to analyse the state of mind of such women. Hypnotism attracted attention and caused alarm because of the dramatic way in which it demonstrated the reality of unconscious mental activity, explored the recesses of memory, and showed the immense possibilities of manipulating subjects through the imposition of authority (see Harris, pp. 155-6).

⁵⁷ See Dominique Barrucand, *Historie de l’hypnose en France* (Paris, 1967).

⁵⁸ Harris points out that this spreading alarm represents the pervasive anxiety which underlies the entire medico-legal commentary. Medical concern was aroused by the fact that women seemed particularly susceptible to suggestive influence and that it was up to the males to battle against the immoral and deprived. The enemies of medical—of male bourgeois—authority ready to abuse hypnosis included a variety of potential crooks including Jews, working-class men, criminals, amateur healers and household servants. We agree with Harris in that it is interesting to analyse the layers of ideology that contributed to the characterization of these groups as embodiments of danger and deceit. The medico-legal debate focused attention on the seemingly sensational and explicitly sexual, precisely because of the uncomfortable relationship which medical hypnosis engendered between doctor (male) and patient (female).

hypnotic practices in *Saverio el cruel*, we are still looking at the 'popular' nature, if not about hypnotic practices, at least of popular scientific remedies to cure madness through shock. If we bear in mind that *Saverio el cruel* was originally written as a metaplay, written and played by inmates, to be staged in a madhouse to commemorate the anniversary of the institution, we can see the representation of a voyeuristic social practice of the bourgeois who turn to asylums for magnetizing performance and entertainment.

Furthermore, as Harris claims, the debate on hypnosis was complicated by the existence of two opposing medical schools. The most famous was Salpêtrière in Paris, where Jean-Martin Charcot conducted his influential studies on hysteria. Charcot and his colleagues developed elaborate psycho-physiological interpretation of hypnosis and its relation to hysteria, which helped fashion their particular therapeutic perspective and medico-legal system. From the 1880's these views came under attack, with Hippolyte Bernheim in the *Ecole de Nancy* systematically attacking Charcot's doctrine and proposing a different conception of hypnosis and its implications in medical treatment and judicial debate. It is precisely in Charcot's Salpêtrière where we find a significant clue regarding Arlt's *Saverio el cruel*.

Charcot's personal charisma and authoritative scientific voice gained him the nickname of the '*Napoléon des névroses*'.⁵⁹ As a pioneering neurologist, he soon became a famous personality, renown in Paris society and the political arena; Charcot (son of a carriage builder) became an emblem of the 'new strata' that the emerging Republic sought to valorise.⁶⁰ The more immediate impact on his intellectual development was his running of Salpêtrière (1863). In Salpêtrière Charcot established the foundations for his medical empire exploiting the patients for his *musée*

⁵⁹ Harris, p. 160.

⁶⁰ Charcot was appointed to a chair in Nervous Diseases in 1882 from where he propounded an impressively influential anticlericalism, a polemical stance that had deep implications for his representation of women (see Jan Ellen Goldstein, 'The Hysteria Diagnosis and the Politics of Anti-Clericalism in Late Nineteenth-Century France', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20, 1985, 703-31).

pathologique vivant ⁶¹ as case studies for his experimental research of nervous deceases. Charcot's theatricality was not confined to photographs—he documented his healing power in the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*.⁶² The Salpêtrière's dramatic methods were emphasised by Charcot's Tuesday clinical lectures, during which “the madwomen tales of woe, twisted bodies and extravagant seizures were presented to the bourgeois public.”⁶³

Significantly, both madness and the guillotine were at the very core of the original *Escenas de un grotesco*.⁶⁴ Notably, in *Escenas* the action takes place in a mental institution where a group of journalists gathers to watch a play written by one of the inmates, performed to celebrate the anniversary of the institution. Evidently, that first version which so clearly evoked Charcot's Tuesday clinical lectures was not accepted by Barletta who usually cut, pasted and trimmed not only Arlt's material but most of the plays staged under his directorship of the Teatro del Pueblo. Apart from that significant relocation of the action, very few other changes were made to *Escenas de un grotesco*, where Saverio appears as portrayed in the second act of *Saverio el cruel*.

It is in this light that we may well see Susana representing *La Patria*, thus becoming perfectly ‘fit’ to stand for class hatred. First of all, she is a bourgeois woman (which should be ‘aristocratic enough’ for the Argentine historical setting as we never had kings or queens). Secondly, we know she ‘plays the part’ of a dethroned

⁶¹ See J.-M Charcot. ‘Leçons sur les maladies du système nerveux’ in *Ouvres Complètes*, vol. III, *Hémorragie et ramollissement du cerveau, méthallothérapie et hypnotisme, électrothérapie* (Paris, 1890).

⁶² Harris points out that in Charcot's catalogue of pathologies all, sexual allurements, demonic contortions and convulsive attacks were caught on camera. The photographs encapsulate the daring ambiguity of a clinical method aimed as both scientifically irreproachable and artistically compelling. Like any posed representation, the photographic record proved a significant channel for artistic imagination. Charcot's medical method, Harris goes on, was the backdrop for the wider medico-legal debate, shading the content of the specific arguments and anxieties presented in it. Salpêtrière dramas contributed to the generalised fear that hypnotic manipulation could easily induce individuals, and particularly women, to break contracts. According to Harris, one of the major concerns amongst commentators of the time was that under abusive hypnotic power women could be forced to sign over property, reveal intimate secrets, disregard marriage vows, and commit crimes (Harris, pp. 161-5).

⁶³ Harris, p. 164.

⁶⁴ *Gaceta de Buenos Aires* (No2, August 1934); reprinted by Jorge Dubatti in *El cronista comercial* (3 and 10 of January, 1997).

queen and she is rich. Still, there is a greater factor that transforms Susana into the target of class hatred and at the same time provides Arlt with certain theatricality which is particularly suitable for his metaplay: madness.

The second powerful, perhaps even more significant, symbol we mentioned and find crucial for the development of the play, is the guillotine. Considered the embodiment of the French Revolution (namely justice for the people in the light of the abuse of the powerful) and perhaps because the 'killing machine' is not talked about or described but physically present on stage, Saverio's idea of having one custom-made introduces a two-fold melodramatic call. On the one hand, it is internal to the play, that is, addressed to the characters, particularly Pedro, Luisa and Ernestina. In the second act, we see how they pay Saverio a visit with the excuse of checking on his rehearsing the part he has been given, but really in the hope that by encouraging him to play as melodramatic a part as they can, they would make sure Saverio did not spoil the joke. Perhaps more importantly, the guillotine translates the internal meaning into a symbolic one thus becoming an external call directed at the audience who represent not Susana's side of society but Saverio's. As such, we could read this as the first blow Saverio aims against the bourgeois represented by Susana's party.

It is true that, at times, the plot line of *Saverio el cruel* may be weak. However, Arlt's use of melodrama transforms it into the powerful voice of the 'petty' people. It is also important to remember something many commentators tend to overlook, namely the fact that Melodrama is considered the voice of the French Revolution.

Saverio. — ¡Y cómo quiere gobernar sin cortar cabezas!

Ernestina. —Vámonos, che...

Pedro. —Pero no es necesario llegar a esos extremos.

Saverio (*riéndose*) —Doctor, usted es de esos ingenuos que aún creen en las ficciones democráticas parlamentarias.

Ernestina (*tirando del brazo de Pedro*) —Vamos, Pedro.... se nos hace tarde.⁶⁵

Interestingly enough, what shocks Pedro, Luisa and Ernestina the most, is neither the uniform of the Colonel (which we agree may not be altogether very convincing as such) nor the discourse Saverio adopts which, as we have pointed out, mirrors only too well national and international fascism (which could be justified by the fact that historically, Latin American ruling classes have supported the military).⁶⁶ What does make their blood run cold is the actual guillotine dominating the claustrophobic space of Saverio's room. The theatrical effect of the physical object on stage, plus Saverio's miming out the part of the Colonel introduces an unequivocal element of the Grand Guignol, which enhances the goriness of the scene.

IV. Humiliation and Masculinity

David Foster points out⁶⁷ that, for Argentina as well as for international critics, one of the most revisited commonplaces in relation to Arlt's oeuvre is the humiliation of the human being. That humiliation has been approached by different angles. If we refer to humiliation in philosophic or existentialist terms, the works of Giordano, Larra, Pastor and Sebrelli spring to mind.⁶⁸ On the other hand, David Maldavsky's approach is a psychoanalytical one while Masotta's line is oriented

⁶⁵ Arlt, vol II, pp. 70-1.

⁶⁶ In Argentina, the coup to the second presidency of Hipólito Yrigoyen in September 1930 was certainly backed by the ruling elite. From then on, Argentine democracy would have been an uphill task in seeing its presidents to the end of their administration. There were actually nine coups from 1930 to 1981, most of which were backed by the high-born. In Chile, this is also the case of the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende by Augusto Pinochet.

⁶⁷ David William Foster, 'La teatralización de la masculinidad en *Saverio el cruel*' in *Roberto Arlt: dramaturgia y teatro independiente* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, Cuaderno de GETEA No 12, 2000, pp35-42)

⁶⁸ See Jaime Giordano, 'Roberto Arlt o la metafísica del siervo' in *Atenea*, 1968, No 419, pp. 73-104; Raúl Larra, *Roberto Arlt, el torturado* (Buenos Aires: Quetzal, 1973); Beatriz Pastor, *Roberto Arlt o la rebelión alienada* (Buenos Aires: Hispamérica, 1980) and Juan José Sebrelli, 'Inocencia y culpabilidad de Roberto Arlt' in *Sur*, 1953, No223, pp 109-119.

towards the social life in the twentieth century.⁶⁹ Flint and Orgambide also comment on the humiliation of Arlt's characters in the light of an interpretation of the 1930s, which in Argentine history is known as 'la década infame' (the infamous decade).⁷⁰ Nevertheless, whichever approach to humiliation we choose to follow, it seems that it would make little difference. This is because, and we agree with Foster, Arlt's vision of the human being epitomises the humiliated.⁷¹ This is certainly true of his prose; we only need to look at Arlt's novels, *El juguete rabioso* (1926), *Los siete locos* (1929) or *Los Lanzallamas* (1931), or many of his short stories to find in all Arlt's main characters are imbued with humiliation. In Arlt's world, a human being is a fundamentally masculine entity who, strictly circumscribed by specific factors of social class, drifts along in the world, blinded by the forces that toy with him and manipulate his destiny, and never quite understanding or daring to defy them. Yet, this constant coming back to depicting humiliation is not exclusive to Arlt's narrative; it applies to his theatre as well. For Foster, Arlt found that the stage would provide him with the possibility of projecting, in a concrete way, that material and spiritual misery that is so frequent in his prose.

Critical approaches focussing on the men in Arlt's narrative universe are not scarce. The question of the lack of female characters and the representation of masculinity of his male heroes, in Foster's terms "*machos deficientes*" (i.e. 'deficient machos') is something that cannot be, and has not been, overlooked.⁷² Leland's⁷³ approach, for instance, relates to homoeroticism but not in relation to the conventional homophobia of Argentine culture also clearly visible in Arlt's oeuvre. The relationship Leland perceives between Arlt's characters (and when we say this

⁶⁹ See D. Maldavsky, *Las crisis en la narrativa de Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Carlos Pérez, 1969) and O. Masotta, *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* (Buenos Aires: Jorge Alvarez, 1965).

⁷⁰ See J.M. Flint, 'Politics and Society in the Novels of Roberto Arlt' in *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv*, (1976, n.f. 2.2, pp 155-63) and P. Orgambide, 'Roberto Arlt, cronista de 1930' in *Roberto Arlt, Nuevas aguafuertes porteñas* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1960) pp. 7-25.

⁷¹ See Foster 2000.

⁷² Foster, p. 36.

⁷³ Leland, Christopher Towne, *The Last Happy Men: The Generation of 1922, Fiction, and the Argentine Reality* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986).

we mean male characters) is one of profound almost erotic affection. This is important, as it represents the social changes Argentina underwent during the 1900s and 1910s. But what Foster discusses is the condition of being a man within the social sector profiled by Arlt.

La perspectiva proporcionada por los llamados estudios de la masculinidad [...] se centran en las cuestiones de cómo el individuo se construye y mantiene una identidad masculina frente al mundo, cuáles son las líneas de fuerza que apoyan lo mismo que amenazan semejante proyecto, y cómo la producción cultural se ocupa de representar este delicado y muchas veces fallido proyecto social.⁷⁴

Within the framework of cultural studies on masculinity, Berger and Connell⁷⁵ claim that identity, in this case masculinity, is socially constructed and maintained by individuals. Cultural products, then, represent, exemplify and illustrate how men approach the enterprise of masculinity, a venture they may well fail, within that social context. In turn, when approaching cultural products, Foster points out a clear division between, firstly that cultural production promulgating an ideal of social conduct nobody can reach and, secondly, that cultural production depicting man in his misery, describing how an individual is belittled by a number of factors that prevent him from reaching his goals. It is to this other cultural production that Arlt's oeuvre belongs.

The starting premise is that one is not born a man but becomes one by constructing and being constructed one's identity. This condition, of fulfilling as many requirements to be a man as a gentleman requires in the process of becoming one, will depend on a wide range of 'defects' Arlt's characters have. All these 'imperfections' that go from some kind of deficiency, clumsiness, madness or any other trace of 'non-masculine' conduct or look, could prevent men from being 'real

⁷⁴ Foster, p. 36.

⁷⁵ See Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson (ed.), *Constructing Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Connell, R. W., *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

men', and thus triumphing in life.⁷⁶ Foster points out that one of the reasons why, in terms of the social ideology of individual fulfilment, Arlt's world seems so irredeemable and hopeless, is because the challenge of being a man does not allow anybody to win. In terms of cultural representations this could be seen as a tragic circumstance, that is, as the impossibility of fulfilling the social norm of being a proper man. Or else, it could also be seen as a grotesque condition, the incoherence of a norm that does not necessarily realizes the social aspirations of an individual, namely fulfilling a particular attempt of masculinity in a social context that consistently undermines it. According to Foster, it is in Arlt's theatre where we can better appreciate, by means of actual representation, the account of human misery and abject poverty, the embodiment of humiliation in relation to the crisis in masculinity imposed by society. This is particularly true when we refer to Arlt's *Saverio el cruel*, whose main argument seems to revolve round Saverio's lack of masculinity.

The first grounds for undermining Saverio's masculinity is the plot itself, as the play is structured around a group of idle, bourgeoisie young men who decide to exercise their class superiority to trick Saverio into a joke they prepare to stage to publicly humiliate the local "butter boy" and amuse themselves.⁷⁷ Besides, the practical joke is based on madness and an alleged 'shock therapy' necessary to cure her mental illness. This Saverio neither understands nor sees as possible: all the same he is persuaded by the intellectual superiority of one of the *señoritos'* testimony. Lastly, the hoax requires a *coup d'état* by means of which a cruel Colonel, archetypal of a banana republic, will expel a virginal princess from her realm. In Foster's view, the farce which Saverio is instructed to participate in comprises two levels of masculine representations within the inner play. The first level corresponds to what

⁷⁶ This cultural fear of finding female traces in male roles is also found in (the ironic remarks of) Cortázar. In his 'Instrucciones-ejemplos de cómo tener miedo' Cortázar tells us that it is enough to see that a doctor is wearing women's socks to question his whole professional authority. (See *Historias de cronopios y de famas*, Buenos Aires: Minotauro, 1970).

⁷⁷ For further discussion, see Chapter 7.

sets out the farce; the narration of a masculinity as witnessed in the relationship of Susana with the shepherd Juan, which Saverio perceives from outside as a spectator.⁷⁸ The second level of masculinity is the role Saverio is given as the ruthless Colonel, in charge of dethroning Susana. At the centre of both levels we find Susana. These two levels correspond to the literal representation of the play within the play. As we will discuss later on, besides those two levels Foster describes, we believe there are another two representations, if not of masculinity itself, at least of a discursive power struggle. These correspond to the representation of masculinity within the play, and not the metaplay; namely the position of power of Pedro, and for that matter Susana, conferred by their social position, and that of Saverio.

The Susana-Saverio relationship is indeed a very complex one. On the one hand, although it is never discussed in the play, we may speculate about Susana's flirtatious means of persuading Saverio to go to their house. It is true that Saverio calls hoping to get a commission for selling butter. It is also true that Susana's social status does not really allow Saverio to refuse. What is also true is that she exploits both her social status and her sensuality, appealing to Saverio's voyeuristic side (only when Saverio sees her playing mad, defenceless Queen Bragatiana does he agree). It is on both these grounds that Saverio is persuaded to play his part in the farce. By agreeing to take part, Saverio is then first instructed in one form of masculinity. The reader knows that although it was Susana who plotted the hoax and even when the dramatic text places Susana at the forefront, in the eyes of the protagonist it is Juan's role of the courteous and helpful shepherd that Saverio first perceives. Susana points

⁷⁸ It is perhaps important to remember that Saverio finds it hard to believe that Susana has actually gone mad: after all, a few days earlier, she had seemed perfectly sane to him. It is after he witnesses Susana and Juan's great performance that the hoax is triggered and Saverio is persuaded to take part in the so-called shock therapy. Saverio comments: "¡Ha enloquecido! Pero, no es posible. El otro día cuando vine a traerle un kilo de manteca parecía lo más cuerda..." (1968, p. 44).

out Juan's— or rather the shepherd's— chivalrous discourse: “Me agrada. Así se expresan los héroes.”⁷⁹

In witnessing this scene Saverio is exposed to the ‘construction of a hero’, actually witnessing the behaviour and discourse of a perfect gallant man. In this particular context of pastoral literature, the principle of men being obliging to women constitutes an unquestionable convention. Actually, here we find three stereotypes, namely Susana’s Queen Bragatiana, Juan’s Shepherd and Saverio’s Colonel. In this particular case, Saverio will find those pastoral conventions that are supposed to be followed. What is more, Susana criticises and almost fails to recognise in Juan the archetypal shepherd as these conventions are not followed to the letter. Susana says: “Sin embargo, de acuerdo con los grabados clásicos, usted deja mucho que desear como pastor ¿Por qué no lleva cayado y zampoña.”⁸⁰ The fact that such a formula rests on a class difference (princess/shepherd) replicates, in Saverio’s eyes, the type of service he has been asked, almost pushed, to render. Foster points out that there is a double irony in Saverio’s perception of the metaplay. Firstly, Saverio never questions the masculinity formula on which the farce lies, that of the noble man abandoning himself to serve the depraved woman. Secondly, Saverio never questions the fact that the hoax is structured around a class difference, that of a royal woman taking advantage of the services of a humble man. This is remarkable considering that in Saverio’s eyes the whole metaplay is a reality. Surprisingly (or not) Saverio never questions either ideological elements, which may well indicate that as a social being those narrative patterns and the genre issues inherent to this farce are well internalised.

According to Foster, it is the second level of masculinity that proves more problematic, as it were. The role Saverio is asked to play is that of the callous Colonel

⁷⁹ Arlt, p. 46.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

who overthrows Susana, turning her into a fugitive. For Foster, this narrative has two dimensions, a passive and an active one. The passive dimension of Saverio's role is the historic fact in the life of Susana's character of Queen Bragatiana, namely that there has been a coup d'état, which made her flee her kingdom and literally drove her mad. The active dimension is the fact that not only has Susana been turned into a fugitive queen, she has also been transformed into this mad and violent person:

Pero no... no... seguirme es tomar rumbo hacia la muerte. Soy un monstruo disfrazado de sirena. Escúchame, pastorcito, y tú, quien seas que me oyes; huye de mí. Aún estás a tiempo.⁸¹

What is very interesting for Foster, is the fact that Susana actually warns Saverio with that "...y tú, quien seas que me oyes; huye de mí." The fact that Saverio does not listen to her warning confirms his "rumbo hacia la muerte", which for him certainly proves to be the end: the end of the farce, and the end of his life.

The idea that in order to accomplish a 'narration of masculinity' (and behave like a man) could in fact be fatal, is what confers Arlt's work with that tragic dimension. This is because playing a part in his grotesque narratives does not only push people towards human indignity. What seems to be more serious is that the outcomes are almost always fatal, rendering the formula of masculinity an actual killing machine. And this is not different to the recurrent shadow that hangs over most of Arlt's narrative and theatre work; namely those Darwinistic pessimisms and antiheroic fate pushing all his main characters to (very often self-) destruction and abjection that we find in both Silvio Astier and Erdosain. In the case of the play we are analysing, Saverio understands the risk he runs within the farce but ignores the fact that outside the hoax, in 'real' life, it might have the same lethal effect. In fact it does; Saverio is shot dead by 'actually mad' Susana. In the metatheatrical dimension of the farce, Saverio agrees to give Pedro and his friends a helping hand and goes along with the role of the Colonel. Although Saverio is allegedly anti-military, in fact,

⁸¹ Arlt, p. 47.

he gets into his character very convincingly. And he does so by following the stereotypical image of a banana republic dictator, which suggests a consolidated background as reader of popular literature.

As we have mentioned before, Saverio's construction of his role as a powerful and brutal Colonel does not leave any details unattended to, going to the extreme of having a guillotine made for the perfect *coup de théâtre*. Indeed, it is around the different 'performative' aspects of this newly obtained masculinity of Saverio's that the second act revolves. At the beginning, when pushed to take a decision about his acceptance of the role by Pedro and Luisa, Saverio protests that: "Es que yo no soy actor, señorita. Además, los coroneles nunca me han sido simpáticos."⁸² It seems evident that Saverio's role as a cardboard Colonel far exceeds the hoaxers' expectations; exalting his masculinity so much that both Pedro and Ernestina are surprised at this sudden change of personality of the once humble, obedient butter salesman. At this point, we realise that Saverio's impersonation is going to be much more than what Susana and her troop have bargained for. Firstly, it is up to Pedro to remind Saverio of the 'limits' of the farce:

Luisa— ¿Pero para qué todo eso, Saverio?

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.⁸³

Secondly, Pedro and Ernestina try to persuade Saverio that the masculine image Susana has in mind is quite different to the radical and extremist one he is projecting. Although they do expect a somewhat masculine, defiant military man, "el coronel de Susana es de un espadón cruel pero seductor" and, as Ernestina comments, "un coronel de caballería es el ideal de todas las mujeres."⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Saverio

⁸² Arlt, p. 55.

⁸³ Arlt, p. 68.

⁸⁴ Arlt, p. 69.

rejects the constraints of the romantic hero. Instead, once Pedro and Ernestina leave, shocked at the guillotine that Saverio plans to use in the farce, he thinks aloud:

Qué gentecilla miserable. Cómo han descubierto la envidia pequeño-burguesa. No hay nada que hacer, les falta el sentido aristocrático de la carnicería (*Restreándose las manos familiar pero altisonante.*) Pero no importa, mis queridos señores. Organizaremos el terror. Vaya si lo organizaremos.⁸⁵

It is interesting to observe how Arlt sheds light, firstly, on the extreme, almost fanatical discourse of ‘masculinity’ that any ordinary man, providing given the opportunity, could find within himself. Secondly, questions are raised about the particular configuration of the exercise of political power through discourse, which not only supports power but also fuels it. Foucault believes that discourse is the means by which institutions wield their power through a process of definition and exclusion, legitimising certain discourses and excluding others.⁸⁶ In this respect, Saverio is only too convincing, to the point that his discourse becomes so realistic that it scares Ernestina, who declares: “Santísima Virgen, qué bárbaro es este hombre...”⁸⁷ What is remarkable is the fact that it is only when Saverio puts on his “power hat”, thus becoming the Colonel, that he can actually exercise his right to a voice.

We believe that this could help explain why Saverio had little chance of declining the invitation to participate in the therapy. Refusing to take part would translate as defying Pedro’s discourse of masculinity and Susana’s social authority: thus challenging the power positions at the first level of the play we mentioned before. Bearing in mind that the butter boy represents not only his own position (or rather lack of one) of social subordinate, he also stands for the stereotypical Italian

⁸⁵ Arlt, p. 71.

⁸⁶ See Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, (ed.) Colin Garden, New York: Pantheon, 1980).

⁸⁷ Arlt, p. 70.

immigrant of the late twenties as Golluscio de Montoya has outlined.⁸⁸ In *Power/Knowledge* the Post-structuralist Foucault uses his “geological” analysis to explore the relationship between power and knowledge and how this relationship operates in what he calls discourse formations, the conceptual frameworks that allow some modes of thought and deny others. Power operates through discourse and discourse is rooted in power, thus power produces knowledge. Truth, in his view, cannot be universal and timeless, as it will be constructed and negotiated against particular socio-historical conditions. Taking this into account, Saverio faces the ‘truth’ represented by the power of the cultural, social and educational capital of Susana and her group. On the one hand, as Foster mentions, Saverio’s being tricked into taking part does depend on his condition of being an obliging chap.⁸⁹ On the other hand the charade also relies on Pedro’s exercising his discursive power flaunting an impressive psychobabble that Saverio cannot replicate, and perhaps does not even understand.

As we have seen, Saverio seems to be transformed into his character and plays the part of the Colonel only too well, exploiting not only the discourse that reminds us of both Argentine and European fascism but also moving, standing and of course dressing like one. Although Saverio is wearing the uniform of a stereotypical, rather disgraceful Latin American dictator, his attitude denotes a change in his character; from submissive and humble butter boy he comes across as transformed into a merciless, cold-blooded military man. The second act opens with Saverio standing on a table he has in his room, a chair and a red throw dressing up the simple furniture. He is also wearing a fake moustache; his acting is imbued with a histrionic quality Pedro, Luisa and Ernestina find all too overstated. The last straw is, of course, the physical appearance of the guillotine Saverio had it constructed for the sake of

⁸⁸ Golluscio de Montoya 1997, pp. 234-243.

⁸⁹ Foster, p. 36.

achieving dramatic realism in his role. Foster indicates that theatre granted Arlt “la oportunidad de una proyección concreta que contrasta con la verbalización abstracta de su narrativa o sus ensayos.”⁹⁰ In this particular play, the stage offers Arlt a double possibility of projecting discourse and behaviour into ‘real’ people as the metatheatrical device projects a stage on the stage. Triggered by the arrival of the guillotine, what scares Ernestina and Pedro the most is Saverio’s histrionic capacity of playing the Colonel only too well:

Luisa— ¡Jesús! ¿Qué es eso?

Saverio (*enfático*) —Qué va a ser... Una guillotina.

Pedro (*consternado*) — ¿Pero para qué una guillotina, Saverio?

Saverio (*a su vez asombrado*) — ¿Cómo para qué? ... y para qué puede servir una guillotina. [..]

Saverio— ¡Y cómo quieren gobernar sin cortar cabezas!

Ernestina— Vámonos, che...

Pedro— Pero no es necesario llegar a estos extremos...⁹¹

As Foster puts it:

Toda la actuación/realización de Saverio aquí es sumamente teatral, tanto en el sentido chabacano de la palabra como por la manera en que Arlt se vale del Segundo acto para poner en evidencia los detalles de la dedicación con la cual Saverio realiza su papel: mucho menos que un papel asumido, es un papel asimilado.⁹²

The last example of a discourse of masculinity is found at very end of the play. According to Foster, the genius, or perhaps the dramatic confusion, of this play lies in the fact that the reason why Susana shoots Saverio/the Colonel never becomes clear. It might be the case that it reflects the plot line Susana proposed to Juan at the beginning, although it is she herself who ‘beheads the Colonel’ and not the shepherd. Another possibility could be, as Mirta Arlt has suggested, that

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Arlt, p. 70.

⁹² Foster, p. 41.

Susana 'really' is mad.⁹³ If we bear in mind that Susana learns from Saverio himself that he has been tipped off by Luisa, this reading could very well suggest a further step into the social moral of the story; namely, bourgeoisie could never be conned by butter boys. Significantly, Susana's shooting Saverio may represent her taking revenge after his spoiling the hoax. Susana's social power has certainly been undermined after the farce backfired and she finds herself, at least for a short while, facing public humiliation in front of friends, at the hands, or rather the discourse, of a social inferior. Thus, Susana could be killing Saverio so that Saverio cannot kill Susana.

Foster underlines that in some cases masculine ideology leads to violence. In this respect, for a man to be 'manly enough' to be socially accepted, at least not to be considered a *maricón*, represents a most arduous and grotesque demand. What is more, trying is not enough as not achieving the standards culturally set means that those who consider themselves more *machos* pose a constant threat. The young man who is in the process of becoming a man, in the process of acquiring social power, thus becomes the inevitable target of not only jokes but also abuse at the hands of those using the power conferred by their masculinity.

For Foster, what is cruel about Saverio's fate is not that he dies trying to act out the paradigm of a man. What seems to be more pathetic is the fact that Saverio is wrong about the consequence of his acting out the part of a man. He does not end the farce exhausted but dead. And this in turn confirms the fact that one is actually a man as long as one conforms to the norms imposed by society.

V. Conclusion

⁹³ Arlt, p. 35.

Having mentioned Arlt's eclectic influences and having analysed *Saverio el cruel*, it may come as no surprise then, that Arlt has recurrently been pigeonholed as a peripheral writer, as this could perhaps be the consequence of his 'cultural anarchy' in the Arnoldian sense.⁹⁴ We can see how both Arlt and *Saverio* are then governed by the rules of Darwinistic pessimism, reflecting that search for social inclusion of the migrant population repeatedly condemned in the *grotesco criollo*. In a nutshell, Arlt would represent on stage the same cultural heteroglossia the canon would aim to tame, his drama translating sometimes as original, rule-breaking, on other occasions as 'dispensable'. Nevertheless, and trying to avoid passing judgement in terms of the intrinsic value attached to the dramaturgy of Arlt in the canonical sense, we cannot but grant that his theatre oeuvre may represent that thriving social group of the early 1920s. This becomes evident by the way in which Arlt subverts literary and theatrical traditions, not necessarily aware of them but, mainly domesticating the highbrow and popular for his and his readership/audience's consumption.

It is necessary to recognise the extent of Arlt's refusal to accept the rules of the canonical game, but rather playing by a set of norms he himself forged. We believe that in the case of *Saverio el cruel*, perhaps more than any other play, Arlt stretched his creativity even further, introducing (perhaps reviving) and subverting conventions of melodrama to deliver a particular political blow. Furthermore, we could see Arlt's making socio-political comments with two tools, the pages of *El Mundo* newspaper (from 1928) and his drama. Arlt would exploit both that daily

⁹⁴ In *Culture and Anarchy*. (ed) J.D. Wilson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932) Matthew Arnold uses the term "anarchy" as synonymous with popular culture which in term serves to describe the disruptive nature of working class lived culture and the dangers concomitant with the working class entering the English political scene in 1867. Arnold proposes that culture, education in a traditional sense, functions as a guide for the aristocracy and the middle-class but, particularly importantly, it must function as a taming agent of the working class. Thus, the ultimate purpose of education is to restore the sense of subordination and deference to the class, by attempting to remove the temptations to any kind of political agitation. Arnold suggests that to tackle the anarchy of culture a mixture of culture and coercion is needed. This is achieved by a cultured State whose function will be to control and curtail the social, economic and cultural aspirations of the working class until the middle class is sufficiently cultured to take on this function itself. In short, education, but only that tailored by the State, is the road to culture

column and later on the Teatro del Pueblo, a theatre he uses "... como 'aguantadero' para asestarle sus golpes al capitalismo, al comunismo y al anarquismo."⁹⁵ And here we agree with González who describes Arlt as particularly sensitive to his historical setting, in a way that perhaps allowed him, unconsciously, and like nobody else, to mediate between that historical then and there and his readership/audience.⁹⁶

Finally, and as we have tried to demonstrate, Arlt's 'conversion' to the theatre proves to have been very much the product of a particular historical moment. As Rita Gnutzmann points out, "[s]ería ocioso discutir otra vez si Arlt era un escritor 'engagé'",⁹⁷ a discussion that has occupied national and international commentators since the late 1950s. What is perhaps undeniable is the fact that Arlt was indeed a *cronista* of the 1920s and 1930s in the sense that he witnessed and chronicled literary, historical, political and cultural changes in Argentina using both newspapers and the theatre for voicing a view. Following Isidro Saltzman, we believe that the historical context in which Arlt is embedded might in itself have provided the socio-cultural trigger leading to a switch from one medium to another. Equally, it is important to remember that though Arlt's implicit socio-political critique may be veiled it is undoubtedly ubiquitous. Therefore, and here we with agree with Pedro Orgambide who considers Arlt "el equivalente a un Daumier". In that respect, Arlt's "apuntes son uno de los testimonios más fieles de un tiempo de crisis y definición."⁹⁸

In conclusion, it is perhaps unfair, for the reasons previously stated, to brand Arlt's apparent lack of political engagement as a handicap. It is true he might not have overtly declared his discontent with the 1930 *golpe* (he himself admitted as

⁹⁵ Saltzman, p. 76.

⁹⁶ See Horacio González, *Arlt, política y locura* (Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1996, pp 13-14).

⁹⁷ For a thorough analysis of Arlt's engagement in cultural and political debates of the 1920s through his contribution to magazines and newspapers see Rita Gnutzmann's 'Las aguafuertes' in *Roberto Arlt, Innovación y compromiso. La obra narrativa y periodística* (Asociación Española de Estudios Literarios Hispanoamericanos, Edicions de la Universitat de Lleida, 2004), p. 144.

⁹⁸ See *Nuevas aguafuertes porteñas* (Buenos Aires: Hachette, 1960; prologue by Pedro Orgambide), p. 11.

much). Nevertheless, Arlt did voice his critical view. In any case, and we may all agree here, Arlt's theatre oeuvre, particularly *Saverio el cruel* (together with his *Aguafuertes*), introduces a clear socio-political comment about the Argentine life at that time and constitutes a privileged insight about Argentine culture. *Saverio* is indeed a sample of class struggle and history of the third decade of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 7

Translation and the Theatre

“Ningún problema tan consustancial con las letras y con su modesto misterio como el que propone una traducción.” (Jorge Luis Borges)¹

“Translation has to do with authority and legitimacy and, ultimately, with power, which is precisely why it has been and continues to be the subject of so many acrimonious debates.” (André Lefevere)²

I. Translation and the Theatre

As we have tried to demonstrate, translation plays a crucial role in many literary traditions. In the manner commentators such as Venuti and Hale propose, the study of translation can open new approaches to recurrent issues in the history of literatures. Within such literary traditions, off course, we find the theatre (notwithstanding the concerted attempt within British and North American universities to promote drama as a discipline in its own right and entirely separate from literature). As Hale and Upton note,³ the intimate relationship the stage has long enjoyed with translation is, off course, no secret. In Britain, approximately one in eight professional productions reviewed in the national press at the time of writing (2000) was a translation. Nevertheless, translation does not enjoy the same privileged status in other media: statistics suggest that theatre seems one of the most receptive forms, television and cinema suffering from the proverbial “aversion of English-speaking audiences to dubbing and even subtitling.”⁴ Indeed, Hale and Upton point out that “[d]espite theatre’s age-old tendency to adopt material from other cultures, British sensibility has been inclined to underplay the foreignness of its inspirations.

¹ ‘Las versiones homéricas’, *Discusión* (1932) in *Obras completas* (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1974), pp. 239-243.

² *Translation/History/Culture. A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge 1992), p.2.

³ See Hale and Upton’s introduction to *Moving Target, Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation* (ed.) Carole-Anne Upton (Manchester: St Jerome. 2000).

⁴ Hale, 2000, p. 1.

Translations and adaptations, having been thoroughly domesticated, have entered the repertoire almost surreptitiously under the guise of British versions.”⁵ This was especially so in the nineteenth century when almost half the plays staged in the London theatre were of French origin, though few advertised themselves as such. Even perennial classics of the Victorian stage such as *Still Waters Run Deep* (1855) and *The Ticket-of-Leave Man* (1862) were based on French originals.⁶

Literary translation fared much less well, even in the nineteenth century. Today, the British and North American publishing industry has a clear aversion to translation. Venuti, for example, has pointed out that despite American and British publishing output having quadrupled since the 1950s, the percentage of translations has remained at some 2% to 4% of the total number of new titles published.⁷ This is one of the lowest in-translation rates in the world. The publishing industry is by no means the only example of the negative effects of the cultural hegemony of the English language.

Writing about ‘Issues in the Translation of Latin American Theatre’, Kirstin Nigro notes the notorious absence of Latin American theatre in the USA despite the fact that Latinos constitute the second largest minority in the country.⁸ Despite the *boom* and *post boom* phenomena, only a handful of Latin American writers have secured their place on bookshop shelves in the US and Britain, though these include Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1904-1973), Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1889-1986), Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1914-1998), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico, 1928), Guillermo Cabrera Infante (Cuba, 1929-2005), Mario Vargas Llosas (Peru, 1936), Gabriel

⁵ Upton, 2000, p. 4.

⁶ Hale, ‘Popular Theatre’ in *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, (ed.) Peter France, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 382-93.

⁷ See Venuti, 1995.

⁸ See Kirstin Nigro, ‘Issues in the Translation of Latin American Theatre’ in *Moving Target. Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*, (ed.) Carol-Anne Upton (Manchester: St Jerome, 2000) p. 118. Although Nigro particularly focuses on Latino theatre for a U.S. audience, we find her arguments useful with regard to the present discussion.

García Márquez (Colombia, 1928), and Isabel Allende (Chile, 1942). Nigro also highlights that “most readers are unaware of or uninterested in Latin American writing, assuming – incorrectly – that it is too exotic or inferior in quality (meaning usually ‘too political’).”⁹ Apart from the ethnocentricity of the American (and we might add British) attitude in relation to translation in general, needless to say, the situation of Latin American playwrights is further complicated by the performance dimension with all the issues of production, casting and monetary pressures. Nigro attributes this, at least partially, to the lack of circulation printed theatre itself enjoys in Latin American countries. Obviously, there are always exceptions to such generalization; after all, a handful of Latin American playwrights have found their way on to the international stage. Perhaps the most significant theatrical works to emerge from Latin America in recent decades are *Death and the Maiden* by Ariel Dorfman¹⁰ and *El beso de la mujer araña* by the Argentine, Manuel Puig,¹¹ two plays which also made the transition from stage to screen. Equally, Hollywood provided Skármeta (bn. 1928) with considerable publicity when his novel *Ardiente paciencia*, later retitled *El cartero de Neruda* (Ediciones del Norte, 1985; Plaza & Janés, 1995), was adapted for the cinema as *Il Postino* (1994, dir. Michael Radford). Likewise, Argentine Griselda Gambaro and Cuban-French José Triana (bn. 1931) are some Latino names that may sound familiar in English-speaking cultures.

⁹ Nigro, p.118.

¹⁰ *Death and the Maiden* was originally written in English (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1992); translated into Spanish as *La muerte y la doncella*. (Mexico, D.F.: Seix Barral, c1995). In 1995, this piece was made it to a film; *Death and the Maiden* (Mount/Kramer Production of a Roman Polanski Film. [S.l.]: Turner Home Entertainment: New Line Home Video, c1995).

¹¹ *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) was later translated for the theatre (1983) and in 1985 also made it to the big screen. Directed by Hector Babenco and starring by William Hurt, Raul Julia and Sonia Braga, the film was nominated for several Oscars and earned Hurt the Oscar for Best Actor Oscar (1985). In the 1990s it was also adapted for a musical which opened (with its own cast) in London in 1993, the following year in Broadway and later in Buenos Aires.

Despite these examples, stage translation *per se* remains a secondary activity. With the exception of Gambaro and Triana, the other examples provided above are essentially novelists or poets who have turned their hand only occasionally, albeit successfully, to the theatre in the course of very active careers.¹² It is also noteworthy that translation, when it has occurred, is invariably limited to the US stage; the British stage has virtually no history of involvement with Latin American theatre. This is not intended, off course, to diminish the work for the theatre of these authors but to highlight how the genre seems to have been systematically marginalised.

An area which is even more neglected than narrative prose is the translation of theatre. As Susan Bassnett points out, one possible explanation could be the higher literary status poetry holds, “but it most probably is due to the widespread erroneous notion that a novel is somehow a simpler structure than a poem and is consequently easier to translate.”¹³ Perhaps the assumption here is that stage translation is an activity analogous to the production of translations of narrative fiction, and that both activities share a similar methodology. As theatre practitioners recognise, this is clearly not the case. To begin with, dramatic texts have an entirely different purpose since it is only in performance that they realise their full potential. Indeed, as Bassnett notes, the stage translator is thus presented with the central problem of whether to tackle the playtext as a purely literary genre or to “try to translate it in its *function*, as one element in another, more complex system.”¹⁴ As Bassnett further points out, work on theatre semiotics has shown that the linguistic system is not an optional component in a set of interrelated systems comprising in a spectacle.

II. Rewriting *Saverio el cruel*

¹² Skármeta could be the exception as he has forged his career both as a novelist and script writer for television and cinema.

¹³ See Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (London: Routledge 1998), p. 109.

¹⁴ See Bassnett, p.120.

As the above discussion may suggest, working between an Argentine-Spanish and an (in this case British) English system is unlikely to be easy. Trying to create a version of *Saverio* that makes sense to an Anglo-Saxon audience would probably demand an intrusive translation practice more akin to rewriting than translation in the narrow sense. After all, translation in Britain usually depends on finding a convenient topical issue of concern to the host community which may somehow be illuminated by the source text (ST): a “peg” on which “to hang the translation.” Arguably, such a rewriting would constitute not so much a scholarly exercise as a creative one; and for this reason the translation provided here will not attempt to provide a fluent, essentially “domesticated” translation ready for stage performance. However, it is useful to provide a close, reasonably literal (but not excessively so) version, not least because any future rewriting depends, as a first step, on the production of such a core version. Indeed, the British theatre routinely commissions so-called “literals” which are then passed over to experienced playwrights (who may not, and generally do not, read the language of the ST). How “literal” a “literal” should be is open to interpretation, however, and the term has never been defined in a satisfactory manner. In practice, a “literal” can constitute any one of a host of different discursive practices. Not only this, but there is evidence to suggest that the literal is a peculiarly British practice, largely created by the decline of language skills amongst theatre professionals. In any event, there is little evidence of the existence of the concept prior to 1914; and some theatre professionals tend to associate the term with the increase of interest in world theatre ushered in by the early repertoire of the National Theatre in the mid-1960s.

Even the production of a close reading poses a number of questions. To begin with, the very act of translation serves to move the play from a peripheral, non-hegemonic location to a central, hegemonic system. Likewise, the psychological

situation of the translator (in this case, the present writer) is ambiguous: stranded between a scholarly academic tradition (which discourages authorial intervention in the texts of canonical authors) and a theatre practice (which seems to demand such interventions), but also stranded between a native “non-prestige” (Argentinean) culture and the hegemonistic demands of the English language. A third, and far more practical, problem lies in the fact that class antagonism is at the very heart of the play. One hundred years of socialism in Britain – during which time the leisured land-owning classes have virtually been abolished¹⁵ – has largely erased the ferocious class hatred which underlies the play. More generally, a contemporary British audience has no experience of a culture constituted by a small wealthy elite and a massive semi-destitute immigrant population. A final issue with regard to stage translation in recent years has been the tendency of the British stage to largely disassociate itself from literary experimentalism in favour of performance practice in a non-text based context.

But Translation Theory also fails to offer any easy solutions. As we have seen in Chapters 5 and 6, Arlt’s technique as a creative writer has some parallels with the concept of *tradaption* adopted by the English-speaking world. This term, a contraction of ‘translation’ and ‘adaptation’, was used by the French Canadian theatre director Robert Lepage to “convey the sense of annexing old texts to new cultural contexts.”¹⁶ Paradoxically, Arlt was using this system of massive and systematic adaptation at the time when the Prague School was looking for a methodology which could provide a supposedly perfect translation.¹⁷ By this, the scholars of the Prague

¹⁵ Canadine’s work has been highly influential in this respect. See in particular Canadine’s *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

¹⁶ See Verma, Jatinder, ‘British: a *jungli* approach to multi-cultural theatre’ (in *Studies in Theatre Production* 13, pp 92-98), p. 93.

¹⁷ Dramatic texts encompass certain features that are distinctive – dialogue being the central one. Veltruský, to name but one, mentions that, “the relationship between the dialogue and the extralinguistic situation is intense and reciprocal. The situation often provides the dialogue with its subject matter. Moreover, whatever the subject matter may be, the situation variously interferes in the

school, curiously enough contemporaries of Arlt, meant a translation that would work on stage exactly in the same manner as the original source text had done on the target culture.

Examining the function of the linguistic system in theatre in relation to the experience as a whole Bogatyrev suggests that:

Linguistic expression in theatre is a structure of signs constituted not only as discourse signs, but also as other signs. For example, theatre discourse, that must be the sign of a character's social situation is accompanied by the actor's gestures, finished off by his costumes, the scenery, etc. which are all equally signs of social situation.¹⁸

This proves a very difficult and very unpractical notion to exercise as conventions of theatre practice are not even the same within one given culture. Assigning a particular weight or interpretation, for example, to the stage-lighting of a particular scene, is by no means easy. In many respects, such matters are more or less defined by conventional practice as much as the requirements of a director; but whether one can even begin to place more than a subjective evaluation on the impact of the lighting on, say, the emotional register, let alone its ideological import, of a scene is highly debatable. Unfortunately, the conceptual naivety of such a schema – perhaps because of its promise of absolute scientific accuracy – has maintained a fascination for researchers to the present day even though it fails to ask the sort of questions that a theatre practitioner would be interested in. More to the point, since live theatre is about performance, and not about recapturing some past performance elsewhere (however influential or important), the “ideal” translation envisaged by those associated with the Prague School might well prove not so much an ideal as a

dialogue, affects the way it unfolds, brings about shifts or reversals, and sometimes interrupts it altogether. See Veltruský, Jiří, *Drama as Literature* (Lisse: Peter de Rider Press, 1977) p. 9.

¹⁸ See Peter Bogatyrev, ‘Les signes du théâtre’, *Poétique*, VIII, 1971, pp 517-30, as cited by Bassnett, p. 122.

millstone even if it was a viable concept. After all, what is interesting about translation, whether literary or performance-based, is that the target text does *not* have the same colouring and weight as the original.

This system of achieving a perfect translation proposed by the Prague School likewise fails to take into consideration more practical issues. Meech sees the figure of the director (and certainly not the translator, however perfect) at the centre of a production. Indeed, he argues that the theatre poses perhaps a unique opportunity for “researching how a theatre speaks to its audience; how it responds to and expresses the aspirations and concerns of that audience”.¹⁹ Meech points out that “under the cover of a ‘concept’ production, it had long been a practice in Eastern Europe to stage plays from the classical canon, injected with a contemporary political relevance”. In this way, a play such as “*Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar* needed little in the way of adaptation to present all-too-familiar images of tyranny for a politically aware East German audience. No wonder Stalin banned productions of Shakespeare’s plays in pre-War Russia.”²⁰ Thus, it is ultimately the director, and not the translator, who will bear the signature of the production, who will interpret and stamp a play with meaning for his or her particular community. If the same play will be different if performed by the same actors, say at different venues, or even from one day to the next, we can only expect that it will be interpreted in different ways by different directors working in different cultures. As a result, the notion of semiotic equivalence here is not only theoretically untenable but also practically unachievable.

In fact, in the British context at least, the translator has virtually no control over the shape of the final performance. The Director, who is in overall control of artistic decisions, enjoys at least equal status with the playwright, even if the playwright is

¹⁹ See A. Meech, ‘The Irrepressible in Pursuit of the Impossible. Translating the Theatre of the GDR’ in *Moving Target, Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*, (ed) C-A. Upton, (Manchester: St Jerome, 2000, pp 128-137) p 129.

²⁰ Meech, p. 128.

still alive. In this respect, the role of Leónidas Barletta as Director of the Teatro del Pueblo was no different from that of a modern British director. Indeed, Barletta, who usually cut, pasted and trimmed not only Arlt's material but most of the plays staged under his directorship, made him re-write *Saverio* almost entirely. As we noted in Chapter 5 with regard to *Escenas de un grotesco*, where Saverio appears as portrayed in the second act of *Saverio el cruel*, the text undergoes a significant reinterpretation which results in its relocation mainly to Susana's opulent country home.

In the following section, we shall attempt, from a Translation Studies perspective,²¹ to situate Arlt's oeuvre within a wider Argentine tradition of misappropriation, mistranslation, and misinterpretation. We shall also examine in detail the particular translation issues which arise when attempting an English-language translation of *Saverio el cruel*. After all, a text which is largely the creation of a defective national translation strategy can hardly be straightforward to replicate in the language whose culture has been deformed in its birth process.

III. Interpretative communities

When looking at Arlt's oeuvre in general and his theatrical work in particular, especially if we also bear in mind the fact that Arlt was mainly engaged within the Boedo group at Barletta's Teatro del Pueblo,²² we cannot but place the notion of interpretative communities at the centre of this analysis. As Hale, and more recently

²¹ Following the lead set by James Holmes in his pamphlet, *The Name and the Nature of Translation Studies* (pub. by Translation Studies Section, Univ. of Amsterdam, August 1975), André Lefevere proposed the name 'Translation Studies' should be adopted for the discipline that concerns 'the problems raised by the production and description of translation'. See Lefevere 'Translation Studies: The Goal of the Discipline' in *Literature and Translation*, (ed.) James S. Holmes, José Lambert and Raymond van den Broeck (Louvain: ACCO, 1978), pp. 234-5.

²² Most of the plays Roberto Arlt saw staged were premiered at the Teatro del Pueblo. See chapter 4.

Krebs with regard to Edwardian theatre translation,²³ argue: translation can be used, and frequently is used, to create new readings of texts which are at odds with not only the author's intended reading but also the readings of a work's original (source language, SL) audience. Looking closely at a particular interpretive community, or rather a 'translational community', Krebs draws attention to the collaborative interaction of a small group of theatre practitioners working for the West End stage in the early twentieth century and the manner in which that group defined translational practices and constructed a small canon of contemporary German plays within an English setting.

Interpretative communities for Krebs are not so much about translators collaborating with each other, as translators as part of a group which is held together by its relationship to the theatre. A concept which also proves useful in the present context, particularly in relation to our understanding of the cultural practices of a particular interpretive community, is Lury's concept of lifestyle. Incorporating Hebdige's notion of taste as an issue emerging "at certain points as a quite political one",²⁴ Lury defines lifestyle thus:

Lifestyle is [...] an instance of the tendency for groups of individuals to use goods to make distinctions between themselves and other groups of individuals, and thus supports the view that consumption practices can be understood in terms of a struggle over social positioning.²⁵

Even though Lury's concept of lifestyle has not been used in relation to Translation Studies, Krebs adapts this concept as follows:

Translation style is an instance of the tendency of groups of translators to use translation to make distinctions between themselves and other groups

²³ Katja Krebs, 'Dissemination of Culture Through a Translational Community: German Drama in English Translation on the London West End Stage from 1900 to 1914' (Doctoral Thesis, University of Hull, 2002). It is perhaps not insignificant that Hale acted as Krebs's supervisor.

²⁴ Hebdige 1988, p. 47.

²⁵ Lury, 1996, p. 80.

(of translators), and thus supports the view that translation practices can be understood in terms of struggle over artistic/aesthetic positioning.²⁶

Although Krebs' argument relates to German drama in the West End, by analogy, various insights may be applicable to the Argentine situation. In scrutinising the Teatro del Pueblo, Lury's concept of lifestyle could prove useful as lifestyle is part of a group's attempt to differentiate themselves from other groups in "a struggle over social positioning." In this sense, lifestyle is the common denominator of this movement. As Krebs points out, "[a]s a group of theatre practitioners their work in and around the theatre is an attempt to differentiate themselves from the status quo of the theatre landscape and change the role and function of theatre."²⁷ Crucially, another point our Teatro del Pueblo has in common with Krebs' interpretative community of German translators is the fact that the primary aim of the translations conducted by these communities was not publication but performance.

In Argentina, as in Britain, the theatrical experience is largely controlled, as we have seen, by a director rather than a playwright or, indeed, a translator. In fact, the status of the latter is often so questionable that the role can almost entirely be unacknowledged. As in the British system, there is not even any form of power sharing arrangement. The play bears the authorial signature of the director as much as that of the playwright. In any event, the presence of either the playwright or the translator is not demanded at the rehearsal stage (though in other cultures, where the role of the dramaturg is more clearly established, the author/translator is represented by proxy). The expendability of the translator is manifest in other ways, too. You can make do without a formally accredited translator (though the practice may be extremely questionable, numerous productions are cobbled together from a

²⁶ Krebs, p. 67.

²⁷ Krebs, p. 66.

hotchpotch of existing translations without any form of accreditation – though those guilty of such practices are reluctant to draw attention to the fact), but never without actors, the director, lighting and sound technicians, and so on. On this basis, the claims of some schools of thought, notably the Prague School, simply fail to recognise the reality of the power dynamics which exists within the British (and other) theatre.

Such a situation also occurs within a South American context, not least because of the linguistic proficiency of South American theatre practitioners, including actors and actresses, typified by names such as China Zorrilla.²⁸ Although born in Uruguay, Zorrilla is a household name in Argentina. When asked about how she herself interacted with the other actors, the director, and the translator of the foreign plays in which she has played a role (let us note in passing that Romance languages emphasize the role of the actor by talking of his or her “interpretation”), she remarked, in her usual humorous and matter of fact manner, that in her experience, she could not remember ever having come into contact with such a person as “a translator”.²⁹ What the company tended to do, she continued – and here she refers in particular to the production staged by herself and her Uruguayan compatriot Carlos Perciavalle, in the mid 1980s, of Mark Twain’s 1903 *The Diary of Adam*, which they translated themselves and adapted into the musical *El diario privado de Adán y Eva* – was enter into rehearsals on the basis of a “literal” that was usually produced by the director and/or the various actors and actresses involved in the production on a collective basis. This literal would then be worked up later by the director, who would alter and

²⁸ Concepción Matilde Zorrilla de San Martín, better known as “China”, was born in Montevideo in March 1922. Daughter of sculptor José Luis Zorrilla and granddaughter of writer Juan Zorrilla de San Martín, she was the third of five sisters. As a child, Zorrilla lived in Paris due to her father’s work. In 1946 Zorrilla was awarded British Council grant to study at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. In the 1960s, Zorrilla also worked as a journalist covering the Cannes Festival for the Uruguayan *El País* newspaper. She later moved to New York where she lived for five years teaching French in a French school and working in a drama school (notably with actors such as Dustin Hoffman). In 1971, after appearing in *Un guapo del 900* (Argentina 1971, dir. Lautaro Murúa), Zorrilla moved to Buenos Aires where she still lives.

²⁹ Personal communication with the present writer. Buenos Aires, December 2000.

adapt it to suit his own cultural, aesthetic and ideological agenda. In a case such as that of Zorrilla, the desire of a member of the cast to be involved at an early stage in the framing of the overall production, including the “translation”, perhaps suggests a desire to mould a particular part to the actor’s strengths.

Arguably, in the Argentine theatre, the translation is no more than a common property, often undertaken collectively, and subject to any number of permutations. The “literal” (indeed a first draft of the translation) is intended as no more than a “neutral text”, that is a text lacking in ideological colour, either that of the source or the target culture, which provides no more than a blank canvas on which the director can superimpose his new interpretation. In such a context, the translational concept of “domestication” hardly has any meaning either, since the recontextualisation performed by the director might equally apply, as in the case of Arlt, to a locally produced ST, as to a translated ST.

Indeed, as part of that ‘community of interest’ (where the members of a community have certain characteristics in common as well as similarities and agreements, be they cultural, ideological or aesthetic) and, in fact, as a dramaturg, Arlt played an equally “marginal” role in the staging of his own plays as that usually played by a translator. Mirta Arlt comments on the fact that, sometimes, as a part of the Teatro del Pueblo movement, Arlt was forced to compromise both his aesthetic and ideological agenda to fit in with that of his interpretive community. At times, those compromises were merely driven by the meagre budget with which the Teatro operated: “[e]n principio su objetivo fue manifestar sus problemas, inquietudes y opiniones apelando a recursos espectaculares y deslumbrantes que... hipnotizaran al espectador. Era difícil alcanzarlo en un teatro de verdad pobre como era el Teatro del

Pueblo.”³⁰ At other times, however, Arlt’s artistic and, perhaps particularly, ideological imprint was subjugated by the overriding power of the Director. “En esa noche fría de octubre del 36”, Mirta Arlt goes on to comment, “Arlt supo, dolorido, que a *Saverio el cruel* le aguardaba el retorno a las exigencias del Teatro del Pueblo, que en efecto impuso la situación del primer acto, con personajes de la burguesía frívola, inescrupulosa e irresponsable, en lugar de la celebración de un aniversario del manicomio donde los internados eran actors y autores del evento...”³¹ Mirta Arlt further suggests that had the author been alive when his last play, *El desierto entra en la ciudad*, was staged (1952),³² it would also have undergone the usual amount of rewriting after being read and rehearsed by the director and the cast. This perhaps exemplifies how, at least in Argentine theatre, a play, as a much as a ‘literal’, is but the common property of all, writer, translator, director and cast.

IV. Practical Problems

In attempting a ‘literal’ of Saverio, several problems were encountered. Leaving aside the asymmetry of the socio-cultural setting, which we pointed out earlier (see also Chapters 4 and 5) a series of ‘re-contextualizations’ were carried out. Firstly, when rewriting the play into English, and as a general tactic applied throughout the play, there was a need to make the setting more concrete, as English is a more empirical language than Spanish and cannot idiomatically carry the same degree of abstraction. Take for example the use of suspension dots much more frequent in Spanish than it is in English. More concrete examples are: “[e]n cierto modo me alegro que la tía no este. Diría *que era yo el armador de esta fábrica de*

³⁰ Mirta Arlt, ‘La locura de la realidad en la ficción de Arlt’ in *El Teatro y los días. Estudio sobre el teatro argentino e iberoamericano*, (ed) Pellettieri (Buenos Aires: Galema, 1998, pp. 13-24), p. 20.

³¹ Mirta Arlt, p. 23.

³² As we mentioned previously in chapter 4, Arlt finished this play in 1942 but did not see it staged as he died soon after.

mentiras”³³ (my italics) translated for “[i]n a way, I’m glad my aunt isn’t here. *She’ll blame the whole damn thing on me*”, “[l]ocura razonable, señorita”³⁴ for “[i]t’s actually more common than you think”, “[e]so, doctor... una cabeza de cera...”³⁵ for “[t]hat’s it, doctor. A waxwork will do just as well” or “¿[s]e puede?...”³⁶ for “Can I come in?”.

Secondly, as Enkvist points out, “[a] translator should be aware not only of cognitive meanings and basic syntactic structures in his text, but also of its information dynamics.”³⁷ Thus, following the Hallidayan approach of information flow, a textual strategy described and applied to translation studies by Baker,³⁸ there was the need to recast the word order throughout this play so that the system of thematic structures (theme and rheme) – systems that, needless to say, differ in English and Spanish – were arranged appropriately in order to convey the required emphasis of the sentences.

More concrete problems also arise. In the first act (scene 1), Arlt introduces one of the protagonists, Saverio. Saverio earns his living as a ‘mantequero’ (i.e. person who sells butter on commission). This is a trade that, although recognisable for the Argentine audience, is not only obsolete but also would seem particularly foreign to the British addressee. This is an example of what Baker calls ‘non-equivalence at word level’.³⁹ Baker explains that this happens when a word occurring in the SL has no direct equivalence in the TL. “The type and level of difficulty posed,” Baker goes on, “can vary tremendously depending on the nature of the non-equivalence.”⁴⁰ It follows that there are different strategies to bridge this linguistic

³³ Arlt, 1968, p. 40 (Act I, scene 1).

³⁴ Arlt, p 55.

³⁵ Arlt, p 57.

³⁶ Arlt, p 62.

³⁷ Cited in *In Other Words, A Coursebook on Translation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 119.

³⁸ See Baker 1992, pp 119-76.

³⁹ See Baker 1992.

⁴⁰ Baker, p. 20.

asymmetry; the one used here is the strategy of translating by a more general word, or superordinate. A problem with the ‘culture-specific concept’⁴¹ of ‘mantequero’ is that it does not exist in English. In this particular case, the superordinate term ‘roundsman’ was used the first time, to head the semantic field. As such, this word proves useful to introduce both a kind of job but also, and perhaps particularly, to hint at the social class associated with the trade, and which a British audience could identify. The term ‘dairy provider’ is also used to in act 1 (scene VII) when Luisa introduces Saverio to Juan. From then on, the literal hyponym ‘milkman’ is used, as it not only retains the source semantic field of trading but also, like the superordinate introduced earlier, maintains the social class associated with it. In fact, it does not matter whether Saverio sells butter or milk.

Lack of equivalence also occurred above word level. The technique adopted to overcome those particular problems was ‘translation by cultural substitution’.⁴² Such was the case of various expressions found in the ST which needed a TL word, phrase or idiomatic expression with perhaps another propositional meaning but likely to have a similar impact on the target reader. As Baker highlights, “[t]he main advantage of this strategy is that it gives the reader a concept with which he/she can identify, something familiar and appealing.”⁴³ Particular examples abound: “Vas muy bien por ese camino”⁴⁴ for “you’re doing great”, “Julia, no exageres”⁴⁵ for a more idiomatic “Come on, Julia. Don’t blow things out of proportion”, “Yo, mejor que Greta Garbo”⁴⁶ for “Eat your heart out, Greta Garbo”, and “Ha enloquecido”⁴⁷ for “Completely lost her marbles. Gone totally doolally”, to name but a few. This is not

⁴¹ Baker, p. 21.

⁴² Baker, p. 31.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Arlt, p 40.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Arlt, p 42.

⁴⁷ Arlt, p. 44.

only about register, it is also about illocutionary force, pragmatics, implied meaning, and idiom.

Another concrete problem encountered is that of having to negotiate between two languages with different grammatical categories. As Baker points out, “[i]n most languages, participant roles are systematically defined through a closed system of pronouns which may be organized along a variety of dimensions.”⁴⁸ A particularly difficult problem is presented by the lack of equivalence within the pronominal systems in English and Spanish. Apart from the most common distinction system of three persons (first, second and third), which Spanish and English share, Spanish has a formality or politeness dimension. In Baker’s words “a pronoun other than the second-person singular [...] is used in interaction with a singular addressee in order to express deference and/or non-familiarity...”⁴⁹ Although this dimension may be recovered in English by using different levels of lexical formality, more often than not, when translated into English, the politeness dimension denoted in Spanish by the use of ‘tú’ (‘vos’ in the case of the Argentine system) and ‘usted’ “will frequently involve loss of information along the dimension in question.”⁵⁰ Similarly, different modes of address are used in English and Spanish. The English Miss/Mrs./Mr. system seems to be parallel to that of the Spanish Srta./Sra./Sr. The asymmetry lies in the fact that in English these titles are used, almost invariably, followed by the surname of the addressee in question. Although in Spanish that is also the general practice, the fact that it can be used with the first name may pose a particularly difficult problem. Coupling Srta./Sra./Sr. with a first name is a common practice amongst domestic personnel (particular in the Southern Cone) when addressing the Master and/or Lady of the house (or their sons and daughters) in order to convey both, a level of politeness and also to highlight the power relationship between master and servants.

⁴⁸ Baker, p. 95.

⁴⁹ Baker, p. 96.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

For the sake of staying close to the ST, the original “Señor Pedro”, “Señor Juan”, “Señorita Susana”, etc., were kept. Nevertheless, in the event of this play being performed, a surname would have to be provided to level this asymmetry and sound idiomatic in English. In English, ‘Master Peter’ is only possible when addressing an upper class child.

Finally, perhaps the most problematic section was the translation of certain monologues; particularly that of Susana when she performs her hoax metaplay, and that of Saverio when he rehearses his affected speech as the Colonel of the farce. According to Mirta Arlt, Arlt drew inspiration for his plays from many of his contemporaries as well as from canonical writers and playwrights. Referring to her father’s recurrent figure of the ‘double man’, Mirta Arlt claims that “[...] aquellos desdoblamientos de la personalidad están presentes en la literatura de la época y aun de la anterior como lo indican los nombres de Ibsen, Unamuno, Evreiroff, O’Neill, Pirandello, Kayser, Strindberg, Andreiev, y luego también Ghelderode...”⁵¹ But according to her, Shakespeare is also a great influence on his father’s work, and perhaps, crucially, on his dramaturgy:

A nivel de acción exterior, esa concepción del mundo adopta algunas estructuras constantes: una es lo que denominaremos dialéctica del traslado. Constante heredada del novelista y perdurable en el dramaturgo. Sus personajes siempre sueñan con un lugar que es otro lugar, donde se puede empezar de nuevo y pasarse en limpio. El recurso es antiguo. Los personajes de Shakespeare siempre viajan a otros mundos en procura de salud espiritual o de evasión. Próspero a su isla mágica, Titania a su bosque mágico, Lear al destierro, Macbeth al lugar del crimen, Otello a Chipre.⁵²

⁵¹ See Mirta Arlt, ‘Introduction’ to *Teatro completo de Roberto Arlt*, (2 vols, vol 1, Buenos Aires: Schapire, 1968, pp 7-23) p.13. The impact of Andreiev on Arlt’s work has not hitherto been discussed in detail either here or elsewhere. It will be the subject of a separate study by the present writer.

⁵² Mirta Arlt, p.14.

Therefore, the strategy used to tackle the monologues of Susana, and Saverio's metaplay, is to borrow 'back' from Shakespeare. This seems to be a most appropriate translation strategy for this text as it allows not only for an encoding that explores the natural resources of English theatre, but also because it represents a return to one of the very authors who inspired Arlt's theatre.

CONCLUSION

According to the paradigm advanced by the Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) School, translation is central to the development of any young literature.¹ However, though such cross-cultural exchanges take place in all cultures, arguably, the effect is most pronounced in terms of the influence cross cultural exchanges have on literary genres. Indeed, some critics would claim that translation plays a vital role in the distribution, construction, development and survival of genres and is at the centre of literary and cultural innovation across history. Although, as Kenneth Haynes comments, it is “often difficult to tell whether a foreign work exerted an influence on writers directly or through translation, or both”,² there can be no doubt that translation, far from being a contaminating factor, provides a powerful literary stimulus at specific junctures. “[B]etween the extremes of translation and inspiration and as plagiarism”,³ literatures and genres have been influenced, when not constructed, by the different forms translation takes. Likewise, Ezra Pound indicates that “British literature was kept alive during the last century by a series of exotic injections. Swinburne read Greek and took English metric in hand; Rossetti brought in the Italian primitives: FitzGerald made the only good poem of the time that has gone to the people.”⁴ Pound’s comment, Haynes goes on, helps correct the view that the “literature of the period was inhospitable to translation. It is easy

¹ See Itamar Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies* (Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for the Study of Poetics and Semiotics; Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, special issue of *Poetics Today* 11/1), 1990.

² Kenneth Haynes, ‘Translation and British Literary Culture’, *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, vol. 4 (1790-1900), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp 3-19.

³ Haynes, 2006, p. 17.

⁴ Pound 1968, pp 33-4, quoted in Haynes, 2006, p. 9.

(and essential) to see translation as an integral part of literary history in the eighteenth or twentieth centuries.”⁵

More recently, and with specific reference to the development of the Gothic novel, Horner has claimed that ‘cultural transfusions and “misappropriations” effected by the act of translation should not be dismissed simply as derivations or deviations’.⁶ Indeed, the whole tenor of *European Gothic, 1760-1960* (2002), a collection of academic articles edited by Horner, represents an attempt to challenge the tyranny of Anglo-American narratives of the Gothic, seeking instead to “demonstrate the importance of translation” in general and Continental European writing in particular on “the development of the Gothic novel”.⁷ Central to Horner’s argument is Hale’s contribution: ‘Translation in distress: cultural misappropriation and the construction of the Gothic.’ This paper, claims Horner, “is of crucial significance since it argues [...] that the Gothic novel was not only the cause of considerable translation activity [...] but that the genre was also substantially a *product* of this process”.⁸ More precisely, Hale argues that the Gothic novel, in its British incarnation, was energised as much— if not more so— by translated early eighteenth-century French novels, as by the more acclaimed work by contemporary British writers such as Walpole and Leland.⁹ Significantly, the group of translated novels he examines not only slightly predate the effulgence of the Gothic in the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See *European Gothic, A spirited exchange 1760-1960*, (ed.) Avril Horner (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 3.

⁷ Horner, 2002, p. 1.

⁸ Horner, p. 4.

⁹ Hale, 2002, pp 17-38. Hale sees translation at the core of genre formation as he believes that the ideological manipulation, misappropriation and mistranslation (conscious or not) that occurs to texts as they are transposed from one culture to another frequently gives rise to generic mutations. Indeed, he argues that the English Gothic novel is, in fact, but one example of this process, examining the strategies of various late eighteenth-century British women translators who use translation as a means of rewriting early eighteenth-century French texts by male writers. Hale’s theory proves equally useful when tackling the question of the genesis of not only Argentine detective fiction but also English, American and French. See chapter 6.

early 1790s but all were the work of women writer-translators who later became respected practitioners of the genre that they had helped to create. Since then, Hale has expanded his argument to examine the role translation played in the construction of other genres, notably the western (or pioneer) novel, the detective story, and early science fiction.¹⁰

Such an approach, of course, is entirely in keeping with the DTS critical tradition, and may be considered part of the ‘cultural turn’ taken by Translation Studies in the 1990s. However, it also represents a fusion of translational paradigms with the concept, derived from the work of Stanley Fish, of ‘interpretative communities’ (i.e. specialist groups of readers or users of texts who read texts against the grain for their own purposes).¹¹ Fish, of course, was mainly interested in the interpretive possibilities a SL text presented to a particular group of SL readers. But the concept has clear advantages for those studying translations. As Hale, and more recently Krebs with regard to Edwardian theatre translation,¹² argue: translation can be used, and frequently is used, to create new readings of texts which are at odds with not only the author’s intended reading but also the readings of a work’s original (SL) audience. Although the Gothic is not the subject under discussion in the present thesis, detective fiction and theatre clearly are of interest to us here, as is the methodology of manipulative translation strategies as a collective social praxis.

¹⁰ See Hale, ‘Popular Fiction’, in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, vol. 4 (1790-1900), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp 371-381.

¹¹ See particularly Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in the Class?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

¹² Katja Krebs, Doctoral Thesis, University of Hull, 2002. See chapter 7.

Though these matters may be only of marginal academic interest in Britain and North America, countries which have long been exporters of culture rather than importers (and it is perhaps by no means accidental that the nineteenth century, when the status of English was considerably less assured than it is today, was the great watershed in the construction of hybrid cultural forms such as the Gothic and the detective story), this is not the case with Latin America. Indeed, even the most cursory understanding of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin American literary system necessitates some form of explanatory framework to account for the overwhelming role translation has played in our cultural history.

II. National Literary Tradition and the question of 'originality'

As Sergio Waisman points out, however, not only has translation “affected the founding of national literatures and their renovation with respect to European and United States traditions”, it is also a controversial subject: “Originality, of course, (...) is a sensitive issue for Latin American writers because it is often linked with cultural and political independence and is magnified in importance by the disparities between Latin America as a political and economic periphery and Europe and the United States as both symbolic and real centres of power.”¹³

Focusing on the question of national literary traditions, where does Latin America stand in relation to translation? And in particular, what meaning can we assign to Argentine literature within this framework of 'originality'? The question of where

¹³ Sergio Waisman (muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_language_quarterly/v062/62.3waisman.html, accessed 3 January 2006).

Argentine *belles lettres* stand in relation to appropriation, copying, translation, rewriting and the apocryphal is something that has occupied various generations of scholars both canonical and peripheral. Indeed, this is a matter that has been discussed by numerous national literary genealogies from the time of the founding fathers of literary and political thought, such as Domingo F. Sarmiento (1811-1888) in the nineteenth century, to twentieth-century cultural icons like Borges.

Let us begin by examining the response of Borges himself. In his seminal lecture 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' Borges wonders:

¿Cuál es la tradición argentina? Creo que podemos contestar fácilmente y que no hay problema en esta pregunta. Creo que nuestra tradición es toda la cultura occidental, y creo también que tenemos derecho a esta tradición, mayor que el que pueden tener los habitantes de una u otra nación occidental.¹⁴

This text, which has been exhaustively drawn on by Argentine and many other Latin American authors, has been repeatedly used as a yardstick with which to measure and position 'our' national literatures with respect to Occidental canons, without being defined and restricted by them. According to Borges, the key would be to take a stance of irreverence; which in turn could be exploited and recycled as a rereading. Borges' rereading comprises a potential that could be better understood if we broaden the concept of translation and include a range of linguistic exercises such as imitation, thematic variation, rewriting, as well as paraphrase, and pastiche. George Steiner defines such

¹⁴ Borges, p. 272. 'El escritor argentino y la tradición' is one of a series of lectures given at the Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores later compiled in *Discusión* (1932).

linguistic transformations as *topologies of culture*.¹⁵ All the practices, including citation, reference, and allusion, are part of the cultural background of a nation and as such they are transmitted through history and across languages and cultures in a process that is arguably the same as translation. Borges, of course, playfully exploits the game of translation, rewriting and what he terms the apocryphal (though we, more prosaically, might like to think of it in terms of hoaxing); ‘El acercamiento de Almotasim’, ‘Pierre Ménard, autor del Quijote’ and ‘Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain’ are only three examples which epitomise these intertextual games. From here, it is only a small step to incorporate within such a general concept as the translational practice Venuti delineates by the term ‘domestication’, a concept which, in simplistic terms, involves adjusting the translated text to the taste of the receiving community.¹⁶ Indeed, is ‘domestication’ anything more than an interpretive practice?

¹⁵ See *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 414-76. Steiner uses this term to refer to his broad definition of translation and its role in the transference of culture through time and space.

¹⁶ Under Schleiermacher’s influence, Lawrence Venuti divides translation strategies into two opposing poles he calls ‘foreignisation’ and ‘domestication’ according to the degree of correspondence between source and target text. A domesticating translation adjusts the text to the taste of the receiving community. With a domesticating approach, local expectations are taken into account to a greater extent. Foreignising practices, on the other hand, are supposed to retain the otherness encountered in the original. See Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility. A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 17-27. Wilhem von Humboldt maintains that a reader of the translation should be facilitated to feel the foreign but not foreignness itself (See von Humboldt, “Introduction to His Translation of *Agamemnon*”, trans. Sharon Sloan, in *Theories of Translation*, (ed.) Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 58. Since foreignisation and domestication are opposite ends of a continuum, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to identify a translation as exclusively favouring one or the other practice. Commentators such as Oittinen and Paloposki maintain that “[m]ay be foreignizing [as a practice] is an illusion which does not really exist. Perhaps we should only speak of different levels and dimensions of domestication.” (For a critical approach to Venuti’s polarization of translation strategies, see Riitta Oittinen, *Translating for Children* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc. 2000), pp 73-75, and Outi Paloposki and Riitta Oittinen, ‘The Domesticated Foreign’ in *Translation in Context*, (eds.) Andrew Chesterman, Natividad Gallardo San Salvador and Yves Gambier (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, n. d.), pp 373-390. As Venuti himself later recognised, “the very function of translating is assimilation, the inscription of a foreign text with domestic intelligibilities and interests.” (See *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, London and New York: Routledge. 1998, p. 386). Venuti suggests the politically correct tendency these days is foreignisation. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that foreignness is preconceived therefore constructed rather than retained. A translation as a

Although not necessarily in search of a high-brow aesthetic, Arlt himself did not fail to exploit intertextual games of this kind, borrowing from both foreign and national generic conventions in his novels, short stories and plays. As an unequivocal postmodernist, it is Ricardo Piglia (bn. 1941) who epitomises in contemporary Argentine letters the creative exploitation of the aesthetics of the rewriting, pastiche and the apocryphal; significantly, it is Arlt, more than any other writer, who is the principal exponent of these practices in Piglia's own writing and who is, consequently, integrated, if only surreptitiously, into the canon of Argentine literature.¹⁷ This is true not only because Piglia is considered one of the leading Latin American writers of the 'post-boom' generation, but also because he has devoted much of his critical energies to the study of Arlt's narrative form. Furthermore, in works such as *Nombre falso* (1975), *Respiración artificial* (1980), and *La ciudad ausente* (1992), Piglia includes Arlt in the various literary debates in which his fictional characters engage.¹⁸ In his narratives Piglia also exploits the device of playing intertextual games and applies them to the controversial socio-political context of Argentina in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. By

metatext will speak about how an individual culture, that of the translator's, perceives and constructs another culture. Foreignness is thus also constructed within the particular boundaries of the target culture and as such will reveal a great deal about the contemporaneous discourses in a receiving community – perhaps more so than will transpire from the SL community.

¹⁷ Using Borges as a pivotal milestone, Piglia suggests numerous ways of rereading the Argentine tradition. Combining postmodern aesthetics with apocryphal writings, Piglia exploits socio-historical readings of traditional Argentine writers reread during the transition to democracy. Amongst Piglia's most renowned pieces we find *Nombre falso* [tr. *Assumed Name*] (1975; a cross between not only national traditions but also foreign since we can trace the influence of Capote and Hammett), *Respiración artificial* [*Artificial Respiration*] (1980), *Prisión perpetua* [Perpetual Prison] (1988), *La ciudad ausente* [The Absent City] (1992), *Cuentos morales* [Moral Stories] (1994) and *Plata quemada* [Burnt Money] (1997).

¹⁸ See Rita Gnutzmann, 'Homenaje a Arlt, Borges y Onetti de Ricardo Piglia' (*Revista Iberoamericana*, nr. 159, Pittsburg, 1992, pp. 437-228); Jorge Alejandro Bracamonte's 'Roberto Arlt en Ricardo Piglia: provocaciones políticas (1997) and Barbara Schuchard's 'Sala de espejos argentina' (in Morales Saravia, 2001).

questioning literary lineages at times of political and aesthetic uncertainty.¹⁹ Piglia's texts demonstrate how translation may be exploited as an act of resistance on the cultural periphery. That translation may implicitly be a locus of subversion goes without saying, but it is rare for the subject to be formulated in these terms as an explicit literary device, theme even. In fact, Piglia's work may be seen as a celebration of the fact that Argentine literature is essentially a massive exercise in interpretation.

Let us take an example. Using the postmodern technique of 'life imitating art, imitating life', a chapter in *Nombre falso* features a hardboiled novella which introduces a character named Ricardo Piglia who tries to solve the mystery of an unpublished text allegedly written by Arlt. In the first part of this final chapter, 'Homenaje a Roberto Arlt', fiction doubles as literary criticism when Piglia, the character, reworks a genre best exemplified by tales penned by Borges. In the second part, in an appendix, we are presented with Arlt's assumed text 'Luba'.²⁰ Significantly, when *Nombre falso* was first published in Argentina, Mirta Arlt (Roberto Arlt's daughter) criticised Piglia for publishing her father's manuscript without her authorization and knowledge (though she owns her father's copyrights, she was unaware – for obvious reasons – that such a manuscript existed). Mirta Arlt was not the only one hoaxed by Piglia's homage/parody; the Biblioteca del Congreso (Library of Congress) catalogued 'Luba' under Roberto Arlt.

¹⁹ The questioning of the literary canon at a particular socio-political juncture may very well remind us of our author. Arlt is perhaps embarking on the same game when Silvio Astier and his gang raid the library in *El juguete rabioso*. This is particularly significant if we think that they challenge the canon when they assess the 'literary' value of the volumes worth stealing according to their commercial value. See chapters 2 and 3.

²⁰ That is where the word game played by the title becomes most significant as it hints equally at the parody or homage element; 'nombre falso' literally means 'fake', in this case rather than 'assumed' name. Ricardo Piglia, *Nombre falso* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1975).

In addition, Piglia is responsible for juxtaposing Arlt and Borges as the two most influential Argentine writers.²¹

As we discussed in Chapter 4 in relation to detective fiction, what for Borges is perhaps an aesthetic, erudite game for Arlt becomes one of 'illicit' misappropriation.²² Indeed, as we also claim in earlier chapters, in Argentine literature this aesthetics of stealing is possibly epitomised by Arlt who perhaps best exploits his condition on the margins by recycling from both the very core of the canon as well as from the edges. But this aesthetic predisposition seems to predate Arlt. In fact, it goes back to the nineteenth century and the very roots of our national literary foundation. Waisman points out that although "[t]he aesthetics of stealing and plagiarism that in twentieth-century Argentine literature is usually associated with Arlt, we quickly realize, is not limited to him at all. Borges, too, works with an aesthetics based on a kind of theft; his essays and fictions repeatedly demonstrate the potential for writers in the periphery to appropriate texts from the center. [...] From its beginnings Argentine literature thrived on the tension between the foreign and the local, between the interlingual translation of European literatures and languages and the intralingual translation of local *criollo* traditions."²³

It is also worth citing Piglia on this issue:

²¹ See 'Entrevista: Ricardo Piglia', conducted by Marithelma Costa, *Hispanamérica: Revista de Literatura* 15 (1986), p. 42. See also Jorge Fonet, "'Homenaje a Roberto Arlt": O, la literatura como plagio,' *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 42 (1994), pp. 115-41; and Noé Jitrik, 'En las manos de Borges el corazón de Arlt: A propósito de *Nombre falso*, de Ricardo Piglia,' *Cambio* 3 (1976), pp. 85-91.

²² In chapters 2 and 3 particularly (but we also touch upon this issue in later chapters) we mention the question of access to education and how in the case of Silvio Astier, the protagonist of *El juguete rabioso*, such access to cultural capital is by no means 'licit' as he has received no formal education and, consequently, his access to cultural capital is blocked. This is a problem that will be replicated throughout Arlt's work and is said to mirror his own experience as regards his own condition as a marginal writer.

²³ (muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_language_quarterly/v062/62.3waisman.html, accessed 3 January 2006).

This dual relationship – with political practices and foreign literature – represents a unique method of autonomization of literature and its function. The definition of what it means to be an author is developed in this double bond. “One must keep one eye on the French intelligentsia and the other fixed on the entrails of our nation”: Esteban Echeverría’s motto synthesizes this dual process. *Strabismic vision* [i.e. ‘cross-eyed’] represents the true national tradition: Argentine literature is constituted within a double vision, a relationship of difference and alliance with other practices and other languages and other traditions. One eye is on the Aleph, the very universe; the other sees the shadow of barbarians, the fate of South America.²⁴

Piglia’s standpoint is particularly interesting for our debate because the bottom line of many of his works seem to emphasise the importance of mistranslation, rewriting and misreading the Argentine literary tradition. Of course, translating, borrowing and appropriation should not mean lack of originality and be dismissed as mere digressions. Certainly, as Hale highlights in relation to the English Gothic and the French *roman frénétique*, the level of ideological manipulation occurring as texts get ‘translated, mistranslated, appropriated and misappropriated’ into a culture allows for trans-cultural mutation of genres.²⁵ In this light, we could see Borges and Arlt as the two extremes of perhaps the same process of ultra ‘domestication’ for local consumption. At the centre of the canon we find Borges, whose intellectual game of incorporating an irreverent tone into the translation of foreign texts ultimately serves as a highbrow aesthetic that constitutes his trademark. Similarly, Arlt’s brand of misappropriation and re-

²⁴ Piglia, ‘Sarmiento the Writer.’ in *Sarmiento: Author of a Nation*, ed. Tulio Halperín Donghi, Iván Jaksic, Gwen Kirkpatrick, and Francine Masiello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 129-30 quoted by Sergio Waisman (see footnote 1).

²⁵ Hale, p. 17.

contextualization represents a mixture of both low and highbrow cultural practices, recycled for a particular socio-cultural readership, which is likewise his trademark. In essence, both ‘crimes’ of misappropriation are the same.

Indeed, Borges himself admits that there is nothing wrong with ‘rewriting’; after all, Borges’ rejuvenating style is based on this very aesthetics of mistranslation. A text, thus, does not recognise national or linguistic borders; in any case, and as Borges believed, there is no such thing as a definite or finished text; “[p]resuponer que toda recombinación de elementos es obligatoriamente inferior a su original, es presuponer que el borrador 9 es obligatoriamente inferior al borrador H – ya que no puede haber sino borradores. El concepto de *texto definitivo* no corresponde sino a la religión o al cansancio.”²⁶

As for Arlt, although perhaps a less conscious process, the ‘stealing’ (and recycling) of aesthetic and literary conventions becomes part of his creative economy.²⁷

²⁶ Borges, p. 239.

²⁷ In Chapters 2 and 3, we analyse Arlt’s policy of reading as analogous to crime. This is particularly evident in *El juguete rabioso* where protagonist Silvio Astier and his gang raid a public library. In that episode, they assess the worth of the books they steal according to their economic retail value. See also, Piglia, ‘Roberto Arlt: Una crítica de la economía literaria’, in *Libros* (March- April 1973) p. 24.

SAVERIO, THE CRUEL

A three-act dramatic comedy.

Characters

Susana, Juan, Pedro, Julia, Luisa, Maid, Saverio, Simona, Caddie, Ernestina, Landlady, 1st Man, 2nd Man, Juana, Ernesto, Dionisia, Demetrio, Roberto, Maria, Herald.

Guests, Voices.

FIRST ACT

Hall to the study. To one side, the stairs; to the front, interior door; in the foreground, windows.

SCENE I

PEDRO, JULIA, SUSANA and JUAN. *They are all between 20 and 30 years of age.*

JULIA *is embroidering.*

SUSANA. (*Abruptly breaking apart from the group and pausing by the door*) So stop here and at that point I'll say to him: But what makes you so sure that I'm Susana?

JUAN. All right. So what happens next?

SUSANA. (*Going back to her embroidery*) He should have been here by now.

PEDRO. (*Glancing at his watch*) Five o'clock.

JUAN. (*Looking at his watch*). You're 7 minutes fast. (*To SUSANA*) This is a great hoax you've come up with.

SUSANA. (*Standing up, ironically*) Well at least none of our friends will be able to complain that they were bored this year. In fact, it'll be more like a private theatrical show than a house party.

JULIA. The whole idea is disgusting.

SUSANA. (*Indifferently*) Really? (*JULIA does not answer. To JUAN*). No mistakes now.

JUAN. Nooo (*SUSANA, silent*)

PEDRO. Isn't he a good actor?

JULIA. (*Still looking at her embroidery*) Thank goodness the mater isn't around. She doesn't find this sort of thing very amusing

PEDRO. But the mater would see the joke in the end. She always does.

JULIA. But don't you care how the poor lad will feel when he realises you've been fooling him?

PEDRO. If he's a bright lad, he'll treat it all as a joke and say so to Susana's face.

JUAN. (*Ironically*) Well done you!

JULIA. If he's a bright lad, he probably won't be amused. Intelligent people never like to have their faces rubbed in it.

JUAN. In a way, I'm glad my aunt isn't here. She'll blame the whole damn thing on me.

JULIA. Quite right, too. You and Susana have concocted the scheme between yourselves.

PEDRO. Come on, Julia. Don't blow things out of proportion.

JUAN. You always take thing too seriously, Julia. Nobody means any harm by it. Even if the milkman ends up with egg on his face, we don't exactly cover ourselves with glory either.

JULIA. I don't see why you have to be so mean to have a good time.

PEDRO. (*To JUAN*) She's quite right, it's all your fault for encouraging Susana.

JUAN. (*Pretending to be angry*) You have to credit Susana for her artistic temperament, don't you?

JULIA. Susana's artistic temperament is not the point. What I find so disgusting is this whole business of spinning a web of deceit in which to catch a perfect stranger.

JUAN. Calm down, children! That's exactly the point, Julia. There wouldn't be any fun in it if the victim knew what we had planned for him. You don't get any laughs from picking up a banana skin before somebody steps on it.

SCENE II

LUISA *enters suddenly, dressed to go out.*

LUISA. Hello, hello, everybody. How are you, Juan? Has he arrived yet? (*She stops by PEDRO's chair*)

JULIA. We were just talking about him? (*Silence*).

LUISA. What's going on between you? It feels like a funeral parlour in here. Where's Susana?

JULIA. Don't you think this whole business is going too far?

LUISA. There you go again! Why do you always have to be the spoil-sport? It's only a bit of fun.

JULIA. I'm glad to hear you say so!

LUISA. Do you agree, Juan?

JUAN. Of course.

JULIA. If you don't watch it, that roundsman will kick up a right stink.

LUISA. I just wish I had a part to play in it.

JULIA. Don't worry, you will. I'm washing my hands of the whole business. It's just downright mean.

JUAN. Come on!

JULIA. No, I'm serious! If the mater were here, I'd get her to put a stop to it right this instant. *Getting up*). I'm going. *(Silence)*

SCENE III

LUISA, PEDRO *and* JUAN.

JUAN. What a stroke of luck, her walking out on us like that!

PEDRO. What if she's right? What if the milkman does kick up a stink?

LUISA. *(Ruffling Pedro's hair)* Don't be silly; he's only a bloody milkman. We're going to split our sides over it. Shall I play Julia's part?

PEDRO. What about your mother?

LUISA. She'll be fine.

JUAN. Fine with me. *(The phone rings. PEDRO hurries to get it)*

PEDRO *(On the phone)* Oh, is that you? No, he's not here yet. Susana is just getting dressed. Tonight. OK, see you later. *(Going back to the table)* That was Esther. She wanted to know whether the milkman had arrived.

JUAN. You see! Everybody's heard about it. *(Lowering her voice)* Just between ourselves: we're beginning to get a reputation.

LUISA We certainly are!

SCENE IV

The same. Enter the MAID.

MAID. Sr Pedro, the roundsman is here.

JUAN. Have you informed Susana?

MAID. No, Sr.

JUAN (*To LUISA*) Let's see how you look in your role of concerned sister. (*To PEDRO*) And you as the doctor. (*Standing up*) Remember all of you to stay calm whatever happens. (*He leaves*)

LUISA. Eat your heart out, Greta Garbo.

PEDRO. (*To the MAID*) You can show him in now. (*Exit MAID.*)

LUISA. (*Unexpectedly*) A kiss for luck, Pedro? (*PEDRO stands up and kisses her swiftly. Then he sits down at the table pretending to look serious. LUISA tidies her hair. Enter SAVERIO. Physically, he is small and shy. His tie is not straight. He's wearing a reddish shirt and has a hang-dog look about him. Exit MAID. SAVRIO pauses at the door not knowing what to do with his hat*)

SCENE V

SAVERIO, LUISA *and* PEDRO; *then* SUSANA.

LUISA. (*Approaching him*) How do you do, Saverio? Allow me. (*She takes his hat and hangs it up*) Allow me to introduce myself: I am Susana's sister.

SAVERIO. (*Shyly moving his head*). Delighted, I'm sure. Where's Miss Susana?

LUISA. Do come in. I'm afraid you won't be able to see Susana. (*Indicating PEDRO*). This is Doctor Pedro.

PEDRO. (*Shaking SAVERIO's hand*) How do you do?

SAVERIO. Nice to meet you. Miss Susana asked me to call in to talk about the privatisation scheme.

PEDRO. Yes, so I was informed. You would like to become the main supplier for the local schools.

SAVERIO. Do you think I stand any chance?

LUISA. I'm sorry, Saverio. This is probably not a good time for business.

SAVERIO. (*Missing the point*) But my milk is top quality, ma'm. I can supply as much as you like. Straight from the cow: no additives nor nothing.

LUISA. The thing is...

SAVERIO. (*Interrupting*) Additives are an important issue in the dairy business. Children have very sensitive stomachs. Only last year there was a big scandal about fresh milk being mixed with returns that was past its sell-by-date.

LUISA. I'm sorry that this is such an inconvenient moment to talk about such matters. There's no easy way to say this, Saverio, but we're in the midst of a family crisis here.

SAVERIO. I'm so sorry. May I ask... I don't mean to pry....

LUISA. Of course. It's my little sister Susana...

SAVERIO. Susana? What's wrong with her?

PEDRO. Completely lost her senses. Gone totally doolally.

SAVERIO. *(Taking a breath)* Mad? But, that's impossible. I was here only yesterday and she seemed as sane as you or I.

LUISA. Well, you know how it is. These things can happen to anyone.

SAVERIO. But it's so unexpected.

PEDRO. Well, see for yourself. There she is, staring into the garden.

Through the door Susana can be seen, her back to the audience, looking out into the garden.

PEDRO. Let's watch her. We can all hide here.

PEDRO, SUSANA and SAVERIO hide. SUSANA turns round. She is down stage, her hair loose on her shoulders, dressed in men's clothes. She walks fearfully, moving her hands as if she was pushing aside lianas and branches.

SUSANA. *(With melancholy)* These bearded trees clad in silence. *(Stooping to the floor and examining it)* Their shadows seem a canopy most fatal. No trace of mortal man. *(Raising her arms and in a ringing tone)* Oh ye Gods! Why have you abandoned me? Fiends of hell, why dost thou haunt me? I wander defenceless in this green Inferno. Fate! Wouldst thou pity me? I sleep defenceless in this hostile place.

Drums are heard.

... The drums, the drums! Always the sinister beat of the soldiers' drums. Where is my body-guard? Gone, gone, since I left the palace. *(Holding her head)* It's so heavy... this poor head of mine. Little song-bird *(looking around sadly)*! Why dost thou look at me like that? Dost thou pity me? The falling dew is cold and chill, And no bird sings in Arcady. How can my misfortune harm you? *(In desperation.)* Peace, peace! Have pity on me! If you can command these elements to silence! Every animal in God's kingdom has a sanctuary where it can rest its tired head! Everybody but me, the fugitive of injustice, the victim of a tyrannical Colonel.

The drums are is heard again, though more distant.

(SUSANA *surveys the landscape.*) They are trying to trick me. A tree! But could I climb high enough? I would tear my hands. (*She pretends to be touching a trunk*) How rough is the bark. (*She drops to the ground, her back leaning against one of the legs of a garden table.*) Nameless, unspeakable fears crowding in on me! [Who will show pity to an unknown outlaw, chaste and pure as I am. Even the wild beasts seem to understand that. They respect my virtue.] (*She stands up*) Get a grip on yourself, girl! There's no cave the Colonel's soldiers have not searched. (*She pretends to lift a shrub*) Three nights I have slept in the jungle (*she holds her aching foot*), if we could call such a state sleep: exhaustion, rather, disturbed time and again by the roaring of the beasts of the jungle, the whistling of snakes that drive even the moon mad? (*Taking her hands to her aching head*) Oh, when will this torture end!

SCENE VI

JUAN and SUSANA

JUAN (*enters, dressed casually, and put his hand on SUSANA's shoulder*) Shhhh! Everything's all right, Susana.

SUSANA. (*With a violent start*) Susana? Who's Susana? And who are you?

JUAN. Let's sit down. (*He points out a chair*) There log's will do for a seat..

SUSANA. For God's sake, answer me! Who are you? What do you want?

JUAN (*Hesitating, as if he'd forgotten his part*) Sorry... I've just realised that you are a woman – a woman dressed as a man.

SUSANA. But why did you call me Susana?

JUAN. Did I call you Susana? You must be mistaken. Why should I have called you Susana?

SUSANA (*Sarcastically*) So... you work for the Colonel too?

JUAN. (*Pretending surprise*) The Colonel? What Colonel?

SUSANA. (*Placing her hand on her bosom*) That's a relief!. I can see you don't know the cause of my fear. (*Smiling*) What a fool I am! I should have realised from your leather chaps! You must be the local shepherd.

JUAN. Yes, yes... I am the shepherd.

SUSANA. You don't look much like a shepherd, not the sort you see in the engravings. Where is your crook and your flute?

JUAN. Now is not the time for playing the flute.

SUSANA. (*Standing and looking him up and down*). You're not bad looking, you know. You remind me of Tarzan (*To herself*) Well built. (*Shakes her head sadly*) You'd better go back to the woods where you came from.

JUAN. I don't see any need to.

SUSANA. (*Tragically*) I've just had the most dreadful vision. (*Prophetically*) I see you lying on the marble steps of my palace, with seven swords thrust through your heart.

JUAN. (*Hitting his biceps boastfully*) Seven swords, did you say, miss? Just let them try! Anybody who comes after me, I'll knock them down.

SUSANA. That's the spirit! You super-heroes have such a way with words. (*Serious*) Poor young man. Could you hide me in your cabin in the woods for a few days?

JUAN. My cabin in the woods? But you'd hate it there. It's much too simple for a fine lady like yourself.

SUSANA. Don't you worry. I won't disturb you. I need to do some serious thinking. (*Sitting down*) I'm so tired... My life is such a mess these days. (*To herself*) Everything around me seems like a dream. Tell me, are you married?

JUAN. No, ma'm.

SUSANA. Any lady friends?

JUAN. Ma'm, I am a gentleman!

SUSANA. I am glad to hear it (*She paces to and fro*). That simplifies the question. Women upset everything. Let me look into your eyes. (*She leans to him*) You're smiling. Yet, I see a trace of fear at the back of your eyes. (*Sarcastically*) You're not sure which side you're on, are you?

JUAN. Please, Susana!

SUSANA There you are... You did it again...Who is this Susana? A girlfriend?

JUAN. (*Hesitating*) I'm sorry. My mistake. It's just you remind me of a shepherdess who used to live round here. Her name was Susana.

SUSANA. Shhhhh! One of the Colonel's spies might be listening?

JUAN. We would have heard the dogs.

SUSANA. Can you keep a secret?

JUAN. Of course, ma'm.

SUSANA. (*Shaking her head in desperation*) Better not... helping me would be to sign you own death warrant. I am a monster dressed up as a mermaid. Listen to me my dear shepherd, and whoever is out there spying on me, run away from here. Get away while there's still time.

JUAN. (*Beating his biceps.*) Let them come! I'll ram their teeth down their throats!

SUSANA. I doubt it. You have a noble soul. Childish. (*She paces undecided stopping before him*) Your eyes don't lie. The smoothness of your brow testifies to your innocence. You're not one to go out looking for trouble, are you, or getting innocent people caught up in your mess?

JUAN. (*Stammering*) Of course not, ma'am. I am an honest man.

SUSANA. And no girlfriend. Perfect. Do you know who I am?

JUAN. Not yet, ma'am.

SUSANA. Hold on tight, this will surprise you.

JUAN. I'm all ears. Nothing you say could surprise me.

SUSANA. It will. I am Queen Bragatiana.

JUAN. The queen? Dressed as a man? Alone in the woods?

SUSANA. Quite a surprise, isn't it.

JUAN. It certainly is.

SUSANA. So I imagine, my dear shepherd. It's not every day that a shepherd runs into a dethroned queen.

JUAN. I'm honoured.

SUSANA. Can you now understand the extent of the disgrace?

JUAN. Your Majesty! I see but I cannot believe.

SUSANA. You call me majesty. Am I dreaming? What a pleasure! It's been so long since last I heard the word!

JUAN. (*Kneeling down*) Your Majesty, allow me to kiss your hand.

SUSANA *gives it to him making an exaggerated gesture of pleasure.*

SUSANA. (*Emphatically*) Shepherd, I demand to reward you for the pleasure you have given me. I hereby confer on you the rank and title of count.

JUAN. (*Reverently*) Your Majesty, your obedient servant.

SUSANA. I will call you the Count of the Flowering Tree, because your soul is like a fragrant tree. All those who shelter under your shade become impregnated with your perfume.

JUAN. I am touched by your praises, Your Majesty. I am speechless at your misfortune.

SUSANA. (*Melancholic*) My dilemma perplexes you, doesn't it? When I see myself reflected in the silvery mirror of a bubbling stream in the clumsy garb of a tramp I cannot help but wonder: how can it be possible that a queen born and bred should be compelled to beg for mercy in the woods, a fugitive from a revolution plotted by a rebel Colonel and a party of agitated shop-keepers?

JUAN. Then it is all the fault of the Colonel?

SUSANA (*Angrily*) And the shop-keepers, Count, don't forget the shop-keepers. This revolution is not the people's revolution, but a conspiracy of grocers and market-traders who proclaim that men are descended from the apes mixed in with a couple of Spaniards with large overdrafts. You don't understand politics, but let me tell even my loyalist friends had to kowtow to their claptrap. Even as we speak they are awaiting my return. In order to save my life, I was forced to flee, dressed in a maid's uniform and dragged down an underground passage like a hunted vixen.

JUAN. Enough to terrify the wife of a coal-heaver let alone an innocent young girl.

SUSANA. How can I describe my escape, Count? A thousand times my virtue was imperilled. What lies and sophistries I was obliged to spin.

JUAN. But Majesty, you did escape unscathed?

SUSANA. Fortunately, I was protected by the Virgin Mary. I had a small print of her about my person. (*She takes it from her bosom and kisses it. Changing her tone of voice.*) How would you like to...?

JUAN. How would you like to... what? Majesty?

SUSANA. How would you like to cut off the Colonel's head?

JUAN. (*Taken by surprise*) Cut off the Colonel's head? But what's he done to me?

SUSANA. (*Letting her head fall, discouraged*) I knew I couldn't trust you. I thought: the Count will go straight to the Dragon's cave and with his sword will sever the head of the wicked Colonel from his body. We shall celebrate a "Colonelicide" in the Palace. I can picture it now. You are striding forward along a path of roses... bearing a shiny tray of gold on which the Colonel's dishevelled head oozes blood and gore. Can you imagine the sheer beauty of such a scene, shepherd? The most delightful of my ladies-in-waiting will run to greet you. Hark! The violins are striking up. A hundred heralds proclaim your arrival on silver trumpets: the Count of the Flowering Tree. The sheer beauty of it!

JUAN. Oh, if it's all a matter of trust and aesthetics, there's no earthly reason why I shouldn't chop off the Colonel's head.

SUSANA. That's more like it!

JUAN. (*Naively*) The Colonel won't be very pleased though, will he?

SUSANA. Don't be silly, Count! Nobody likes having their head severed from their body.

JUAN. Couldn't we just try to reason with him? It's good to talk.

SUSANA. Such youthful naiveté! It's quite obvious to me that you've spent the best years of your life tending the sheep-dip. Even a mule would be more amenable to reason.

JUAN. Is he so difficult?

SUSANA. Impossible! People say he's got the heart of a lion, the brains of a donkey! (*The drums are heard again*) Listen! What's that?

JUAN. The drums again.

SUSANA. The soldiers are searching for me. We must be away, Count.

JUAN. My cabin is this way, Majesty. They'll never find us there. (*Both exit.*)

SCENE VII

SAVERIO, LUISA, and PEDRO enter slowly, then JUAN.

LUISA. It breaks your heart just to hear her! What a loss! She really does think she's in the jungle.

They sit round the table.

PEDRO. It's actually more common than you think, miss.

SAVERIO. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it. (*Staring at them*) I swear I wouldn't believe it. (*Naively to PEDRO*) Tell me doctor, the man who was playing the part of the shepherd – the Count – is he mad as well?

PEDRO. No; he is one of Susana's cousins. He only agreed to take part because we're still trying to decide the best way to treat her.

SAVERIO. Oh! That's clever.

LUISA. You can tell a lot from what someone with a disturbed mind is saying.

SAVERIO. There's something frightening about madness even if you're perfectly sane. (*Pensive*) She's really determined to chop off the General's head.

LUISA. Can I go and see Susana now.

PEDRO. It's not advisable, miss. She's with Juan at the moment and his presence has a calming effect on her.

SAVERIO. Do you think that kind of insanity can be cured, doctor?

PEDRO. It's too early to say. But I do have a plan I'd like to try. It's been known to work in the past. It involves recreating the patient's imaginary world. In this case, the kingdom she thinks she's lost.

SAVERIO. Is that possible?

LUISA. Oh, yes. We're going to stage the entire royal court. Most of Susana's friends have already promised to take part.

JUAN comes in wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

JUAN. How did I do?

LUISA. *(together)* Very good.

JUAN. *(Looking to Saverio)* Mr...

LUISA. Let me introduce you to Mr. Saverio, our dairy provider...

SAVERIO. Pleased to meet you.

JUAN. My pleasure. *(Sitting down, to LUISA)* I was all right, wasn't I?

PEDRO. There were a few difficult moments. Now Juan, what we need to do is find someone who could play the part of the Colonel.

SAVERIO. What exactly is the point of acting out this farce, doctor?

PEDRO. In a nutshell: Susana's obsession revolves round cutting off a head. It constitutes the leitmotiv of her wandering thoughts. Our intention is to make Susana think that she has actually witnessed the scene of Juan cutting off the Colonel's head. The shock the patient will get by seeing such a violent act should frighten her out of her delirium.

SAVERIO. But nobody is going to agree to having their head cut off even to cure Susana.

PEDRO. We'll get a head from a hospital morgue.

SAVERIO. God Almighty! How macabre!

JUAN. No, no. We can't do that. It too unhygienic. You never know what diseases these heads are harbouring.

SAVERIO. Just think what would happen if the family got to hear about it and came to claim it back before we'd finished with it. It could be really awkward.

PEDRO. What if we used a wax head and some dye?

LUISA. That's it, doctor. A waxwork will do just as well.

PEDRO. As a doctor, I would be inclined to use a real human head. It would be much more realistic. In the circumstances... We can make do with a wax one.

SAVERIO. Do you know what brought on her insanity?

PEDRO. Not really. Too much reading, perhaps. An anaemic trauma of the brain?

SAVERIO. Have her periods been regular?

PEDRO. (*Serious*) To the best of my knowledge. (*LUISA covers her mouth with a handkerchief*)

SAVERIO. Begging your pardon doctor, but speaking as a layman it seems to me that there's nothing better for someone suffering from a weak constitution than a balanced diet – one based on dairy products, that is. In my experience...

PEDRO. There is nothing wrong with Miss Susana's general health – her problems are purely mental.

SAVERIO. Butter is very good for the brain, doctor. However, eating adulterated butter can give rise to all manner of...

JUAN. Saverio, this really hasn't anything to do with butter...

SAVERIO. (*Emphatic*) Butter strengthens the nervous system, tones the muscles, and aids digestion...

PEDRO. I'm sure butter is very good for you, but...

SAVERIO. (*Imperturbable*) The civilisation of a country is measured by their annual consumption of butter.

LUISA. The thing is...

JUAN. For goodness sake, can we stop talking about butter! What we want to know is if we can count on you to play the part of the Colonel in our farce. We'd pay you of course.

SAVERIO. (*Surprised*) Me... play a Colonel? But I don't like the military.

PEDRO. You'd only have to be a pretend Colonel like in a comedy at the theatre. That's all.

SAVERIO. A comedy? What for? Wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity to try a butter-based treatment? I can provide you with gallons of the stuff. Completely pure, no additives of any kind. Not even much whey in it.

PEDRO. Come on, Saverio. Can we drop the subject of butter. Believe me: you can't treat madness with solidified dairy fat.

SAVERIO. With the greatest respect, doctor, there's nothing make-believe about butter. The world might be an illusion, but...

LUISA. Frankly, Susana never much cared for butter.

JUAN. Actually, butter used to make her sick.

PEDRO. She detested butter.

SAVERIO. (*Triumphant, rubbing his hands*) Ha! Ha! Now we're getting down to the nitty-gritty. Everything's clear now! Miss Susana's body is deficient in vitamins A and D, both typically provided in a healthy diet by good butter.

LUISA. Are you obsessed with butter, Saverio!

SAVERIO. (*Imperturbable*) Statistics don't lie, miss. Listen to me for a moment. While the average inhabitant of Argentina consumes less than two kilos of butter per annum, the typical New Zealander packs away sixteen kilos. As for the Americans, irrespective of age, race and gender, they consume thirteen kilos per year...

LUISA. Mr. Saverio, please, drop it! Even the thought of those butter mountains makes me want to throw up.

SAVERIO. As you like. (*Sitting down*) I was only trying to be useful.

PEDRO. If you really want to help us, who not accept our little proposition?

LUISA. (*Suggestively*) It's not much to ask, Mr Saverio, is it?

SAVERIO. The thing is, miss, I'm not an actor. Besides, I've never liked Colonels.

JUAN. Don't you think Susana's health is worth the sacrifice?

LUISA. I'd do it myself, Saverio.

PEDRO. It's almost a humanitarian act.

JUAN. Don't forget that my cousin's family is, in a sense, your benefactor.

LUISA. We have been buying butter from you for a long time now. We might not be in the same league as the New Zealanders...

SAVERIO. What about my round? If I spend all my time playing at being a Colonel, I'll lose all my clients. I've put so much effort into persuading them as to the benefits of a balanced diet based on eating

PEDRO. Butter!

SAVERIO. How did you guess?.

JUAN. You don't need to give up your day job, Saverio. A few rehearsals in the evening would be more than enough.

SAVERIO. And how long will the comedy last?

PEDRO. It won't last long. We've got to catch the patient at her most delirious. Your part will be just one scene... Just the scene of the, er, beheading.

SAVERIO. I'm not running any risk, am I?

LUISA. No risk whatsoever, Saverio.

SAVERIO. (*Half-convinced*) I don't know.... You're putting me in a difficult...

LUISA. Not at all, Saverio, not at all. You are accepting out of the goodness of your heart.

PEDRO. We were counting on you.

SAVERIO. Well...

JUAN. You're a real good sport.

PEDRO. We can get the Colonel's uniform from a costumiers.

LUISA. What about the sword? Oh, I can already picture it in my head.

SAVERIO. Me, too. (*Rubbing his hands*). Do you think I've got the makings of a good actor?

PEDRO. How can you ask? You have the body of a natural.

JUAN. This side, his profile reminds me of Moisi.

LUISA. Would you like to stay for tea, Saverio?

SAVERIO. (*Glancing at his watch*) Thank you, but I'm already late. I should be at the wholesaler's by now.

JUAN. Could I bring the uniform round to your home?

SAVERIO. This is my address (*He writes on a card, to PEDRO*). Don't forget to put a good word in for me with the catering manager at the hospital.

PEDRO. Of course.

SAVERIO. Miss Luisa, it's been a pleasure.

LUISA. (*Walking him to the door*) Thank you very much, Saverio. I will get a friend to come with me to the rehearsals. It's as if you were one of the family.

SAVERIO. (*With his back to JUAN and PEDRO, while they shake their heads*) I don't know what to say, miss. See you soon. (*He goes out; LUISA lifts her arms.*)

SCENE VIII

The same, except SAVERIO, then SUSANA.

LUISA. What an angel! An angel in the shape of a tradesman.

JUAN. (*Shouting*) Susana, Susana, he's gone. You can come in.

SUSANA. (*Entering triumphantly*) How did I do? Did he fall for it?

PEDRO. Great! What an actress you are!

LUISA. I had to sit on my hands to stop myself from clapping.

SUSANA. So he's fallen for it, hook, line and sinker. has he?

JUAN. Not exactly. What I really enjoyed about your performance was the sense of improvisation. You shift from humour to tragedy, just like that.

LUISA. (*Gladly pensively*) Susana! You were wonderful! There was one moment when I had my heart right in my mouth.

PEDRO. This is going to be a right laugh!

JUAN. We'll have everybody round.

LUISA. No doubt about it.

SUSANA. (*Absently*) Oh, this is going to be such a joke.

The three of them stare at her for a minute in admiration, while she, lost in thought, looks away with her hands resting on the edge of the table.

CURTAIN

SECOND ACT

SCENE I

A bare room. SAVERIO, dressed in the fantastical uniform of a colonel of a Centro American pseudo-republic, faces the unmade bed. On the table, a chair. Both, table and chair are covered by a scarlet bedspread. The colonel's sword is stuck into the table. SAVERIO looks into the mirror.

SAVERIO. *(Climbing on to the throne on the table, he suddenly points with his finger while clutching the sword)* Out of my sight, you dogs! *(Looking to one side)* Shoot them down, General. That'll teach them some respect. *(Smiling unctuously)* My dear Minister, I'm sure this minor altercation might easily be subsumed under the responsibilities of the League of the Nations *(Charmingly, standing up)* I am most obliged by the honour of your favours, my charming marquesa. *(Resuming his normal voice, sitting down)* Good God! What a line! *(Grave and confidential)* Your Highness, these are distressing times for prudent rulers such as ourselves. Could not the Holy Father oblige the clergy to attend to the indoctrination of the lower orders? *(With passion, standing again)* My dear madam, I assure you that the ruler is but a colonel, the colonel is but a man, and that the man is in love with you. *(In a more vulgar tone, sitting down)* Well they wanted an actor, and I'll be damned if they are getting one!

SCENE II

SAVERIO and SIMONA.

SIMONA. *(From outside)* Can I come in?

SAVERIO. *(Shouting)* Come in!

SIMONA. *(From outside)* Excuse me...

SAVERIO. *(shouting)* Come on in!

Simona enters, with a tray of coffee in hand, and stops in her tracks, pressing the tray against her chest.

SIMONA. My goodness! Look at the state of those sheets and the bedspread!

SAVERIO. (*commandingly*) Simona, I've been given the red carpet treatment here.

SIMONA. (*standing in the middle of the room*) And people call me bad-tempered, a harridan, and a shrew! Just look at the state of those sheets. What on earth do you think you're doing!

SAVERIO Simona, kindly show some respect to a son of Mars.

SIMONA. Mars, Venus, whatever! You don't have to wear yourself out washing them. (*Amazed*) And what's that sword doing stuck in the table like that? Just you wait till the landlady sees it! Have you gone mad?

SAVERIO (*lighting a cigarette*) Simona, you are an affront to my dignity as a Colonel.

SIMONA. (*putting the tray on the table and adding some sugar. Sadly*) At this rate I'll end my days taking oranges to one of the tenants who was put away in an asylum after he went barking!

SAVERIO Do you know who you're talking to, Simona!

SIMONA. (*passing him the coffee*) Fancy giving up a regular job for all this nonsense!

SAVERIO (*getting excited*) Do stop preaching! Do you know what the Americans say? (*pronouncing carefully*) "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth." Do you know what that means? (SIMONA *says nothing*) Not a clue! Well listen here you illiterate peasant, it means you've got to make the most of your opportunities. Do you remember that fox-trot which had the line: "I never stood a chance." (*He moderates his tone*) And do you remember who it was moaning that he'd never stood a chance? A young man who'd been born in the United States of America with every possible advantage. (*He becomes grave*) Well, I have been given that chance. Simona, and I intend to make the most of it.

SIMONA. You may be an expert on foreign affairs, but that clownish colonel role of yours will do you more harm than good.

SAVERIO. Don't be so naive, Simona.

SIMONA. Just don't come running to me when it all goes wrong.

SAVERIO. (*Impatiently*) You're completely in the dark about politics, aren't you? You win power for a fortnight but it takes them twenty years to get rid of you.

SIMONA. (*Rubbing her eyes with her apron*) You must be barking! You're completely out of your mind.

SAVERIO. (*with authority*) Simona...

SIMONA. (*wiping off her eyes*) What, sir?

SAVERIO. (*lowering the tone*) Simona, have I ever called you stupid?

SIMONA. (*moved*) No, sir.

SAVERIO. You're an intelligent woman.

SIMONA. Thank you, sir.

SAVERIO. But there's always a but... (*Grandiosely*) History is made up of accidental events which assume a universal significance. Unfortunately, you, a chamber maid, lack the basic elements necessary to turn yourself into such a universal significance .

SIMONA. (*to herself*) What is he going on about?

SAVERIO. Let's face it, Simona, politics is not exactly your strongest suit, is it? You lack that sense of opportunism which, in the blink of an eye, can transform a total unknown into a leading statesman.

SIMONA. Mr Saverio, you sound just like one of those men selling snake grease in the marketplace, but...

SAVERIO. I am talking like a populist leader, Simona.

SIMONA. You're too ambitious, Mr Saverio. Remember the old days (*To herself*) I remember them! You used to walk so much, that when you took off your shoes we had to hold our breath. Your room smelled like a cesspit.

SAVERIO. (*angrily*) You poor innocent! If Mussolini had followed your advice he'd still be laying paving stones in Switzerland and Hitler would still be scribbling poetry in a Munich beer-keller.

SIMONA. Not everyone is invited to sit at high-table, Sr.

A voice calling for SIMONA can be heard off-stage. Exit SIMONA..

SAVERIO comes down from the throne and sits on the edge of the bed.

SAVERIO. To hell with women! (*lights dimmed*)

SCENE III

For a minute, Saverio seems to be daydreaming. Suddenly, an arms-dealer approaches him. The latter demonstrates that he is a figure of fantasy by wearing a skull mask. He is dressed in golfing clothes, baggy trousers and a checked cap. Behind him, the caddie, a bag of clubs on his back.

SAVERIO. *(sitting up)* Who are you? What do you want?

IRVING. Your Excellency, I was just about to play a few holes with the Reverend Johnson, who is a member of the Evangelic Congress, when I suddenly said to myself: Let's mix business with pleasure. Irving Essel is the name *(handing him one of his cards)*, I represent Armstrong Nobel Dynamite.

SAVERIO. Oh, so you are an arms-dealer?

IRVING. *(Extracting a cigar and offering it to SAVERIO)* Our civilising mission reaches to every corner of the planet. Armstrong Power Plants, Excellency, offer assistance to fifty-two nations. Our illustrated catalogue (I'm sorry, I haven't got one with me right now) includes every single weapon of war, known and unknown, from the automatic pistol to the Superdreadnought.

SAVERIO. You couldn't have called at a better time. I happened to require some weapons... Tell me *(he smooths down his moustache)* what credit facilities do you offer?

IRVING. Now that, in the words of Lloyd George, we have hanged the pacifists very high and with a very short rope, we are able to provide a limited range of credit facilities.

SAVERIO. What brings you here now?

IRVING. It is a principle of ours, Excellency, to visit every Head of States at the outset of their career. It goes without saying that we enjoy especially cordial relations with generals and admirals. We could provide you with reference, if you like.

SAVERIO. Between gentlemen, there's no need.

IRVING. *(rubbing his hands together)* Indeed, as you say, between gentlemen there is no need for that *(Clears his throat)* Alas, gentlemen also need to earn a living. On that basis I would like to inform you that if your country had the misfortune or the good luck to become involved in a conflict with a neighbouring state, we would be delighted to offer you a ten per cent discount on any weapons purchased, five per cent to the ministers and generals and one per cent to the quality papers.

SAVERIO. A mere bagatelle.

IRVING. Exactly, Excellency; I can see we understand one another. As my great friend the Reverend Johnson says, human nature is so fragile that the only way of luring it to the path of virtue and duty is by keeping it sweet.

SAVERIO. Ha, ha! Mr. Irving. I see that you are a philosopher.

IRVING. The pleasure is all mine, Excellency. *(He turns as he leaves)* May I recommend one of our new chemical product to you: the Violet Cross Gas. The man who invented it has just been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Good-bye for now, Excellency.

SAVERIO. Without a shadow of doubt, the English are the most cynical on the face of the earth. *(A knock on the door, the lights go up)*

SCENE IV

ENTER PEDRO, LUISA *and* ERNESTINA, *a lady in her twenties.* .

PEDRO. Good afternoon, my friend.

SAVERIO. Good afternoon, doctor.

LUISA. You look wonderful, Saverio. This is my friend Ernestina.

SAVERIO. *(shaking her hand)* Pleased to meet you.

PEDRO. How dignified you look in uniform! Let me see you, turn round. *(Saverio turns round slowly)*

ERNESTINA. The very latest fashion.

PEDRO. It gives him such a military air...

LUISA. You look so elegant... The minute you step outside you'll have all the girls at your feet on Florida.

SAVERIO. Don't....

LUISA. *(rascally)* Don't be so modest, Saverio. *(To ERNESTINA)* Doesn't he look just like Chevalier in the "Parade of Love"?

ERNESTINA. That's true; Saverio, you look just like Lionel Barrymore when he was young.

SAVERIO. How amazing.

LUISA. Hasn't your girlfriend seen you dressed in uniform?

SAVERIO. *(clumsily)* I don't have a girlfriend, miss...

ERNESTINA. You must be a married man then with children...

PEDRO. (*looking at the catafalque SAVERIO has set up*) What's that?

SAVERIO. That's my throne for the rehearsal...

PEDRO. (*concerned*) Remarkable...

LUISA. What a genius, splendid! Didn't I tell you, Ernestina? This man is just what we need.

(*Exaggerating*) Saverio, we would have been lost without you?

PEDRO. You've got everything under control, haven't you?

SAVERIO. (*seeing that LUISA and ERNESTINA are looking around*) Let me get some chairs, excuse me. (*He leaves*)

ERNESTINA. He's raving, isn't he?

PEDRO. Poor bloke, but don't rag him so unmercifully, he'll put two and two together. (*SAVERIO comes back with three chairs*)

LUISA. You didn't have to.

SAVERIO. That's OK.

ERNESTINA. Thank you very much. Mr Saverio, may I ask you ... Do you find it very difficult to get into your role as the Colonel?

LUISA. (*To PEDRO*) I wouldn't have missed this performance for anything.

SAVERIO. (*To ERNESTINA*) It's just a question of getting into the character, miss. Nowadays we have seen so many men start from nothing and become great that it comes as no surprise that I'm now beginning to enjoy getting into the skin of a colonel.

PEDRO. You see how right I was when I asked you for help, Saverio?

LUISA. And you were saying you were anti-militarist...

PEDRO. As with everything... It's just a question of effort...

LUISA. And what were you doing when we arrived...?

SAVERIO. Rehearsing...

LUISA. (*shaking her hands as a spoilt child*) Why don't you rehearse now, Saverio?

ERNESTINA. Oh, yes Mr Saverio, rehearse...

SAVERIO. Well, the thing is...

PEDRO. If it's convenient, Saverio. Six eyes are better than two. Speaking as a doctor...

LUISA. That's true. Please, please, Saverio...

ERNESTINA. You will rehearse, Saverio, won't you?

PEDRO. We could correct your mistakes...

LUISA. Improvised scenes are never good.

SAVERIO. (*To PEDRO*) Do you think so?

PEDRO. I do...

SAVERIO. (*climbing to the throne*) How is Miss Susana coming along?

LUISA. The attacks are less intense than before but very frequent...

PEDRO. It's the other way round, Saverio... The attacks come less frequently, but are very intense...

SAVERIO. And do you really think she'll ever be cured?

PEDRO. I have every hope that this farce will restore her to her senses.

SAVERIO. And if she does not get better, you've nothing to worry about. She may as well share the throne with a Colonel.

PEDRO. Saverio, don't say that...

SAVERIO. Why not? You know political contingencies can make marriages that at first sight seem impossible.

LUISA. Saverio... don't say that... Remember! It's my sister you're talking about...

ERNESTINA. Here is the sword, Saverio.

SAVERIO. Do I need it?

PEDRO. 'Course you do, it's part of your character. (*SAVERIO leans the sword on the table and stands still gravely*)

SAVERIO. Am I OK like this?

LUISA. (*biting her handkerchief*) Brilliant! Just like one of our great leaders!

PEDRO. The sword, push it away from your body. You'll look more valiant like that.

SAVERIO. How's this?

ERNESTINA. Perfect.

PEDRO. Breathe in, Saverio. Colonels always look martial.

SAVERIO. (*standing straight, but without over doing it*) I shall imagine I am here in the throne-room turning away my politic enemies: (*louder*) "Go away, you bastards".

ERNESTINA. (*splitting her sides laughing*) We can't hear you. Louder, Saverio, louder.

PEDRO. Yes, put some more passion into it.

SAVERIO. (*wielding the sword energetically*) Piss off, you bastards...

SCENE V

Suddenly, a door opens and, with all the authority of a policeman, the landlady stops in the middle of the room

LANDLADY. What do you think you're doing in my house? Look at the state of that bedspread.

SAVERIO. Kindly do not disturb us, madam, I'm rehearsing.

PEDRO. I'll pay for anything that gets damaged.

LANDLADY. *(without looking at PEDRO)* And who are you supposed to be? *(To SAVERIO)* You can find yourself a room somewhere else for this nonsense. Are you listening to me? *(She leaves slamming the door)*

LUISA. What an impolite old lady.

ERNESTINA. What a temper!

Saverio. You should see her when she's roused! *(Contemptuously)* No better than a fishwife.

PEDRO. Let's continue.

SAVERIO. *(To PEDRO)* Would you lock the door, doctor? *(PEDRO does as he's told and rejoins the group.)*

ERNESTINA. Where were we?

SAVERIO. At the palace ball. My dialogue with the shy lady I meet there: "Marchioness, your president is but a colonel, the colonel is but a man. It is the man who loves you"

LUISA. Beautiful, Saverio! How moving!

ERNESTINA. Excellent, Saverio. It reminds me of a line by Ruben Dario spoken by the Marchioness Eulalia.

PEDRO. You sound just like a real gentleman.

ERNESTINA. Listening to you, nobody would guess you're nothing more than the boy who delivers the milk.

LUISA. What if Susana falls in love with you when she's cured?

SAVERIO. In this next scene I'm receiving a visit from a papal legate. I think I should use a different tone, something less frivolous. Gentle but serious.

LUISA. Certainly.

SAVERIO. What do you think to this: "Eminence, these are pitiless times we're living in. Even the most prudent ruler cannot but help feel distressed by them. Could we not

suggest to the Holy Father that the teachings of the Church concerning the duties owed by errant workers to his employers will help combat Communism.

PEDRO. (*Gleefully*) I like your political sentiments, Saverio. You have a marvellous ethical sensibility.

LUISA. Your support for law and order does you justice, Saverio.

ERNESTINA. Oh! If all rulers were like you!

SAVERIO. (*lowering his voice*) Did it feel right?

PEDRO. Very much so.

LUISA. Excellent. This is all much better than we expected.

SAVERIO. I'm glad.

PEDRO. It couldn't be better.

SAVERIO. (*taking off his military cap*) By the way! Just before you came in I was thinking about a little detail that has escaped us all.

PEDRO. Go on.

SAVERIO. You don't have any friends in the War Arsenal, do you?

LUISA. No (*To PEDRO and ERNESTINA*) What about you?

PEDRO *and* ERNESTINA (*together*) No, we don't either. Why?

SAVERIO. We are going to need some explosives and anti-craft cannons.

PEDRO. (*astonished*) Anti-craft cannons!

SAVERIO. Apart from some other single-shot rifles, machine guns, a launcher for gas grenades, and a flame-thrower.

LUISA. What on earth do we need all that for?

SAVERIO. Miss Luisa, who is in control here?

PEDRO. (*conciliatory*) You are Saverio, but it's only a farce.

Saverio. Let's be clear about this ...it is a farce for the others...but it's real for us...

LUISA. I don't get you, Saverio.

PEDRO. Let's keep calm, everything will be OK. Tell me something, Saverio: You are a colonel in the artillery, OK? Infantry or cavalry?

SAVERIO. (*surprised*) Oh, I hadn't thought about that.

ERNESTINA. Come on, Pedro. An artillery colonel is not very poetic!

LUISA. That's hardly what Susana would want, is it?.

PEDRO. As a doctor, Saverio, I have to tell you that Susana's colonel is a cruel but a charming man.

LUIS. For the record, in films you have to be a colonel in the cavalry to be a romantic lead.

SAVERIO. I'm sorry to disappoint you, miss, but in modern warfare the cavalry hardly counts for anything these days.

ERNESTINA. I'm not sure, Saverio. An officer in the cavalry is still every woman's ideal lover.

LUISA. The sound of galloping hooves, the mane swaying in the breeze...

SAVERIO. Well, that solves the artillery problem. Personally, I'd still rather be in the army! *(There is a knock on the door)*

SCENE VI

SAVERIO, PEDRO, LUISA *and* ERNESTINA. SIMONA *enter*.

SAVERIO. Come in.

SIMONA. There are two men at the door, they've got something for you.

PEDRO. Shall we leave you?

SAVERIO. Just the opposite, it's good that you're here. *(To SIMONA who's looking around)* Show those men in *(She leaves. SAVERIO places the table against the back wall.)*

SCENE VII

Four men dressed as mechanics following SIMONA into the room. They are holding some horizontal wooden supports, and an object covered with plastic bags. The others look at each other in surprise. The men leave the load in the space left vacant by the table was, symmetrically placed so that the red throne on the back serves as frame.

MAN 2. Could you sign here? *(He hands SAVERIO a receipt which he signs. SAVERIO tips them, the men say goodbye and leave. SIMONA remains still, arms folded)*

SAVERIO. You can go now, Simona. *(SIMONA leaves reluctantly)*

SAVERIO (*closes the door, then approaches the object*) Ladies, my good doctor, you will, I hope, congratulate me for my foresight. Just look at this beauty! (*He uncovers the object, the others gathering closer. When they realise the hidden object is a guillotine they collectively step back a pace.*)

LUISA. My goodness! What is it?

SAVERIO. (*with emphasis*) A guillotine, of course.

PEDRO. (*dismayed*) A guillotine? Whatever for, Saverio?

SAVERIO. (*surprised*) What do you mean whatever for? What do you think you use a guillotine for?

ERNESTINA. (*scared*) Good Lord! The man's a homicidal maniac!

SAVERIO. How can you expect to rule without chopping off some heads!

ERNESTINA. Well, really!

PEDRO. Do we really need to go to such extremes?

SAVERIO. (*laughing*) Doctor, don't tell me you are one of those innocents who still believe in the myth of parliamentary democracies!

ERNESTINA. (*pulling PEDRO's arm*) Let's go, Pedro. It's getting late.

PEDRO. Saverio... I don't know what to say. We'll talk about it later.

SAVERIO. Please stay. I'll show you how it works. First, you pull this rope...

PEDRO. Another time, Saverio. (*The guests start edging towards the door*)

SAVERIO. We could fix the guillotine in the back of a truck and offer a door to door service.

ERNESTINA. (*opening the door*) Good night, Saverio. (*They leave*)

SAVERIO. (*running after them*) Don't forget the gloves and the hat (*Silence*)

SCENE VIII

SAVERIO, *thoughtful, comes back into the room. He paces up and down silently before the guillotine. He looks at it, pats it as if it was an animal.*

SAVERIO. Miserable idiots. They're backing out. That's the worst of the middle class. There're always like that. They lack that natural bloodthirstiness of the aristocracy. (*Rubbing his hands in a familiar but pompous manner*) That's all right.

ladies and gentlemen. We'll organise the terror without them. That we will. (*He paces to and fro in silence, suddenly stopping as if he had heard voices. He cups his ear*)

SCENE IX

Suddenly several different voices coming from various loudspeakers can be heard in turn. SAVERIO listens carefully and nods.

LOUDSPEAKER 1. Extra, extra: Saverio, the cruel, is playing an underhand game with the League of Nations.

SAVERIO. Good publicity. The proletariat admires cruelty in a dictator.

LOUDSPEAKER 2. International news from The Radio Herald: Saverio rejects summit with great powers. Foreign ministers refuse to comment on despot's conduct.

LOUDSPEAKER 3. (*long siren call, beams from spotlights cross the stage. SAVERIO's shadow*) News from the Radio Voice. Breaking news. Dictator Saverio's conduct has caused a break down in international cooperation. General confusion among the Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Will Saverio declare war? (*Voices stop, spotlights go off. SAVERIO paces silently*)

SAVERIO. This is a time for political caution. (*Gravely*) Heads will roll for this one after another. (*He pats the guillotine. Starts changing his uniform quickly. There is a knock on the door as he fastens his trousers. He spreads a sheet over the guillotine immediately*) Come in.

SCENE X

SAVERIO and SIMONA enter.

SIMONA. I have to make the bed (*Takes the sheets from the table as SAVERIO is getting ready in front of the mirror*) Just look at these foot marks! (*Showing him a sheet.*) You should be ashamed! (*Shaking the sheet*)

SAVERIO. (*irritated*) What? (*Turns round brusquely*) Simona, in spite of your peasant patina, deep down you're an intelligent woman.

SIMONA. (*resentfully*) What...?

SAVERIO. I've had an idea, Simona.

SIMONA. Look at this bedspread. It was brand new.

SAVERIO I was thinking of giving up my milk round, but I've decided to hang on to it now.

SIMONA. That's the first sensible thing you've said..

SAVERIO I'll ask for a few days off.

SIMONA. (*without turning her head, still making the bed*) Good for you.

SAVERIO. (*patting her on the back and picking up his hat*) Yes, sweetie, for it is written in the Bible: "Thou be cunning like the snake and candid like the dove". Adios, beautiful lady. (*He leaves, while SIMONA shakes her head. She makes the bed.*)

CURTAIN.

THIRD ACT

Dark red room. Lateral doors. In the foreground, on the carpeted platform, a throne. A few lights. The windows are open. In the background, the moon hovers over the trees. Guests move about, chatting, dressed in XVIII century costumes.

SCENE I

PEDRO, JUANA, ERNESTO, DIONISIA, ERNESTINA, LUISA *and* DEMETRIO.

PEDRO. (*to JUANA*) This is what I call a party!

JUANA.. Do I look all right?

PEDRO. Beautiful.

ERNESTO. How do you like my helmet?

JUANA. You look like a warthog.

DIONISIA. *(to JUANA)* My goodness this Saverio's really making us work hard, isn't he!

SCENE II

Same, JUAN, ROBERTO and MARIA.

JUAN. *(enters dressed as a shepherd from a print, half-naked, with a goat skin wrapped around his waist)* Gather round, you fellows! *(They stand around him)*

JUANA. *(to JUAN)* Do you really have to chop off the colonel's head?

JUAN. Yes.

PEDRO. We've got the head. *(pointing to a lateral door)*

ERNESTINA. This pot is in the way. *(pushes it to one side)*

LUISA. It feels like a proper carnival. We only need some steamers.

DEMETRIO. *(to LUISA)* Is it true that the guy has a guillotine at home?

LUISA. Ask Ernestina.

ROBERTO. *(dressed in an armour)* Damn! This is really uncomfortable! *(He tears off his moustache and puts it in his pocket)*

LUISA. *(To JUAN)* Where's Susana?

JUAN. She's getting ready.

PEDRO. I'll go and check if Saverio is on his way.

ERNESTINA. What if he doesn't show up?

LUISA. Don't even think about it.

SCENE III

SUSANA comes in through the door that leads to the throne. She is dressed like the protagonist of a classical tragedy, with a tunic made of fur and sandals. Her hair is loose. She's looks sinister: gaunt face, pale skin.

SUSANA. How do I look, friends?

EVERYBODY. (*Together*) Wonderful.

JUAN. (*Jumping on to the platform*) Ladies and gentlemen. May I have your attention, I won't take long. I am delighted to introduce you to the author of the tragedy which has become the greatest hoax ever concocted in Buenos Aires. Good people, we in BA are pastmasters of pulling each other's legs. If my memory serves me right, the late José Ingenieros and his friends used to throw parties like this. But the never pulled off a hoax which was a patch on this one. Let me introduce to you the brain behind all this: the young lady standing beside me, as delicate a creature as you could hope to meet.

VOICES. Three cheers for Susana.

VOICES. Speech, speech! (JUAN *climbs down from the platform*)

SUSANA. (*Goes to the front of the platform. Silence*) It is not wise for an author to speak in anticipation of the events which are about to take place. I can only say that the denouement will greatly appeal to you. (*Steps down. Applause. The group breaks up into smaller units, chatting*)

LUIS. Pull your hair back a bit more.

SUSANA. How do I look?

ERNESTO. Like the heroine of a tragedy.

DIONISIA. If you do it right, you'll turn everybody's blood cold.

DEMETRIO. You look as if you're possessed by the devil.

ERNESTINA. Juan looks really perfect in that goat skin, doesn't he?

JUAN. (*Joining the group. To SUSANA*) What if Saverio doesn't turn up?

SUSANA. He will, don't worry.

DEMETRIO. Where's Julia? I haven't seen her.

SUSANA. (*Ironically*) Julia is too serious to take part in slapstick.

DEMETRIO. What if you and the milk man end up getting married?.

SUSANA. (*Irritated*) Don't be so stupid!

DEMETRIO. (*Turning round and winking*) Susana, you look as white as a ghost.

SUSANA. (*Coldly*) I've put on too much make up.

JUAN. You're not afraid of the Colonel, are you?

MARIA. What if he tries to cut her head off? (*To the others*) At least we'll be here to protect you, won't we?

DEMETRIO. I hope Saverio carts his guillotine over here tonight. I think I'll split my sides.

JUAN. (*To SUSANA*) Don't worry, we've replaced his sword with one made of paste.

SUSANA. That's reassuring!

PEDRO. (*Ironic*) You're enjoying yourself now, aren't you?

DIONISIA. What about you? I think you're the one who's enjoying it the most.

ERNESTINA. We should fetch Julia.

SUSANA. (*Lively*) No, please, not that. Leave her alone.

JUAN. (*Looking around*) Can I say something? There's one thing I forgot in my little speech. Do you know what this scene reminds me of? That chapter in *Don Quixote* when Sancho appoints himself Governor of the Baratiana Island.

DEMETRIO. That's true. And we are the crazy dukes.

JUAN. (*winking at everybody*) OK. So which of us is insane now?

EVERYBODY. (*forming a circle around SUSANA, pointing at her with their fingers*)
Susana.

SUSANA. (*kindly*) I don't mind being mad because this way I can manipulate people like puppets.

JUAN. (*Putting up his arm*) We're all mad here, but the most incurable case hasn't arrived yet. He's making us wait. He's making Susana wait. (*Turning to the others*) Because Susana is in love with the milk man. She loves him tenderly, deeply, passionately!

SUSANA. (*Faking a laugh*) How utterly charming!

JUAN. (*exited*) But I also love Susana. So far, she has turned a deaf ear to my good works. She is following her own dark and solitary path.

EVERYBODY. (*All together*) Good, good.

JUAN. That's it. I can't remember what I wanted to say.

LUISA.. So, is Saverio coming or not?

DEMETRIO. It looks as if he's not coming.

ERNESTINA. (*To Pedro*) Why don't you go and wait for him at the station?

SCENE IV

The same and the MAID, who then leaves with SUSANA.

MAID. If you please, miss, Saverio has arrived.

SUSANA. I must go. Don't mess things up! (SUSANA and the MAID leave silently)

JUAN. This is wonderful. And do you know why it's wonderful? Because I can smell blood in the air. (*Laughing*) Somebody will pay for this with their life.

ERNESTINA. I hate it when you talk like that! I sometimes think you're a savage!

JUAN. Can't you smell blood?

VOICES. Shut up...

JUAN. Don't say I didn't tell you. But I can feel it in my bones.

LUISA. Do you want us to write it down?

SCENE V

Same and the MAID, then SAVERIO and PEDRO

MAID. Mr Saverio is here (*She goes out*).

JUAN. Just don't muck it up.

SAVERIO *enters into the room followed by PEDRO. The guests move aside instinctively. SAVERIO walks with a military gait. He does not greet anyone. He imposes respect.*

JUAN. (*Goes to the centre of the room*) Mr Saverio, the head is in the next room.
(*Points to the door*)

SAVERIO You're playing the shepherd, aren't you?

JUAN. Yes, sir.

SAVERIO You can go now. (JUAN *leaves puzzled. SAVERIO climbs to the throne and has a look at the guests, who are also looking at him*) Ladies and Gentlemen, when you are ready, the farce can begin. (*To PEDRO*) Tell the orchestra to strike up.
(PEDRO *leaves*)

SCENE VI

SAVERIO *sits on the throne; a waltz begins. SAVERIO, pensive, looks at the couples dancing before him as they turn their heads to look back at him.*

HERALD *(entering at the back of the room, wearing knee-length trousers, playing a silver trumpet. The audience splits into two groups.)* Her Majesty. Queen Bragatiana, wishes an audience.

SAVERIO. *(without getting up)* Show her in.

SUSANA. *(majestically walks between the two groups)* I hope the dukes are enjoying themselves. *(SAVERIO still pensive and cold)* While your fugitive queen suffers in unknown lands, just look at them...dancing! Very well!. *(Slowly)* What do we have here? No fury beasts but elegant hearts of steel. The Colonel is plunged in thought. *(SAVERIO does not turn his head to look at her)* You see that? He doesn't even look at me. He's not listening. *(Suddenly and angry)* You are a wicked man, Colonel! Look me in the face!

SAVERIO *(To the guests)* I regret honourable dukes, that the manners of your queen are not very queenlike.

SUSANA. *(Ironic)* You miserable cur! Despite your impeccable manners, convince me that you haven't stolen my throne! *(Pathetically)* You have destroyed the paradise of an innocent maiden. Where roses used to bloom yesterday, I hear only the murderous grating of iron today.

SAVERIO. Your Majesty has a talent for literature.

SUSANA. The Colonel calls abused innocence literature! Look at me, honourable dukes. Pity me. Are these rags fit for a queen? Where are the hand-maidens who used to garland my hair with flowers? I seek them in vain. And what about my friends? Where are my sweet friends now. *(Turns her head)* I can't see them either. *(Naive)* Would they be at home, by the side of their husbands, safe in the company of their children? *(With terror)* No. They're rotting in jail. The Colonel's agents are plotting their downfall. *(Sardonic)* Why else won't the Colonel look at me? Because it is hard to be confronted with one's own crime! *(She places her hand on her forehead. She remains silent for a moment. She runs both hand over her cheeks)* Living in exile is not easy to endure! To lose one's home land is hard! Quaking like a leaf at the lightest breeze is hard. I see the peasants working in the vineyards and hear young women

singing by the fountains, but I cannot stop tears rolling down my cheeks. I'm the most wretched woman on this earth! And who is to blame for all this? (*Pointing at him*) There he sits! Cold. As suspicious as the Trojan Horse. While he lies in a comfortable bed, I, just like a hungry wolf, prowl about the roadsides. I have no husband to protect me, no children to shelter in my bosom and nourish.

SAVERIO (*Still cold*) Without a doubt, madam, children are a great comfort.

SUSANA. Do you hear? (*begging*) Can nobody else see through him? Children are a great consolation! Tell us, you evil little man: were you a comfort to the woman who gave birth to you? What kind of poisonous being furnish your evil instincts? Speak! What wet nurse fed you with sour milk?

SAVERIO (*Always cold and indifferent*) These are matters of state.

SUSANA. (*Violently*) I couldn't care less about the State! A manufacturer of misfortunes, that's what your state is! Have I asked for your advice? I was dancing with my friends in the fields to the sound of the violins... How long ago it seems! Did my advisers summon you? Did I ask you to mend my laws, make my decrees? You say nothing. Your silence is your shield, Colonel. You've got the nerve of a leader, the stupidity of a raw recruit. But that does not signify. (*Gently*) I have lost everything. Now the only thing I want from you is an answer, Colonel. That's all I ask. Why don't you talk to me? Why do you sit there convicted by your own silence?

SAVERIO (*Standing up*) I will tell you why I haven't spoken. The other day your sister Julia called on me. She informed me of the hoax you have plotted with your friends. I'm sure you can understand why I cannot take all this nonsense seriously. (*Everybody steps back as if they've been slapped in the face. Deadly silence.*) SAVERIO *sits down, impassively*

SUSANA. (*addressing the guests*) I beg you all to leave me alone. I must apologise to this man. (*Looking down, the guests file out in silence*)

SCENE VII

SAVERIO and SUSANA

SUSANA. What a dirty trick you've played on me, Saverio, but it's only fair. (*She sits down by the throne, pensive*) All these lights and tapestries. And here I am, sitting at

your feet looking like a poor tramp. (*Looking up to SAVERIO*) Are you comfortable on your throne, Colonel? Must be nice having the world revolving at your feet?

SAVERIO (*Standing up*) I am leaving.

SUSANA. (*Getting up suddenly, she clutches him by the arm*) Oh, no, don't go, please. Come here... Let us look at the moon. (*She walks with him to the window, holding him by the arm*) Isn't this spectacle moving, Colonel?

SAVERIO (*Dryly*) Why do you insist on carrying on with the farce?

SUSANA. (*Honestly*) I like being alone with you, just the two of us. (*Laughing*) Is it true that you commissioned a guillotine? That is really wonderful. You are as mad as I am. (*SAVERIO lets go of her hand, sits down on the throne and remains pensive.*

SUSANA stays standing)

SUSANA. Why are you not listening to me? Do you want me to go down on my knees? (*She gets on her knees*) The crazy princess gets on her knees before the pale, unhappy man. (*SAVERIO does not look at her. She stands up*) Are you listening to me, Colonel?

SAVERIO. I have been warned by Julia, your sister.

SUSANA. Julia, Julia! What does she know about dreams? But you, you really are a dreamer. Fancy having a guillotine made? Is the blade sharp?

SAVERIO. It is.

SUSANA. And aren't you happy to remain a dreamer?

SAVERIO. Happy? I used to be happy.

SUSANA. What! Selling milk and butter?

SAVERIO. (*Angry*) Yes, being a milk man. (*Getting excited*) In those days I believed I was powerful enough to carry out all my wishes. And that strength came from the milk and butter.

SUSANA. Did you drink that much milk?

SAVERIO. I had to work so bloody hard to earn my living that I ended up overtaxing myself.

SUSANA. And now you are mad at me?

SAVERIO. You're not the problem. You're a shadow filled with words. You turn on the light and the shadow disappears.

SUSANA. Touch me... you'll realise I'm not a shadow.

SAVERIO. There was a time when I used to think that dreams could banish reality. But now I have learned that a hundred ghosts do not make up a living man. Listen to me,

Susana: before I met you and your friends I was a happy man. I went back to my little room at night totally worn out. My customers can be hard work, they're not sympathetic. Some find the milk too thick, some too thin. In spite of that, I was content. My brains and legs were all part of my livelihood. When you invited me to take part in this farce, as my dreams have hitherto always been modest, it transformed my sensibility into a seething cauldron. It changed my life. (*Silence*)

SUSANA. Go on, Saverio.

SAVERIO. It is so sad to analyse a broken dream! I no longer wanted to be a butterfly but a vulture. Nothing but being a dictator would suffice me. (*Leaves the throne and paces nervously*) Do you understand?

SUSANA. It was only a joke...

SAVERIO. (*Laughing*) Don't be naive. My drama consists in having understood, having understood...that I am not built to be a Colonel, not even to play the role of a Colonel. Isn't that tragic? The set cannot fool me any longer. I dreamed to be like Hitler, like Mussolini. Now I understand that I'm nothing but an idiot.

SUSANA. That is the tragedy of your life.

SAVERIO. (*Sarcastic*) That is it. Simona was so right.

SUSANA. Who is Simona?

SAVERIO. She is the maid of my landlady. She was absolutely right when she warned me: "Mr Saverio, don't leave the milk business. Mr Saverio, people in this country are drinking it more and more". It sounds funny to you. It might be ridiculous to compare selling milk with a dictatorship. Anyway...what's done is done... I didn't know what my own strengths were and I tried to live a dream.

SUSANA. What about me, Saverio? Could I ever mean anything to you?

SAVERIO. You? You're just a monster.

SUSANA. (*Taking a step back*) Don't say that.

SAVERIO. You are. A woman capable of coldly plotting such a farce, that woman is a wild beast. You cannot be hurt by anybody or anything.

SUSANA. My farce was only a way of getting to know you.

SAVERIO. That's nonsense (*Pacing*)

SUSANA. That was the only way of measuring how much you liked me. I was looking for a man who could live a great dream.

SAVERIO. You are mistaken. You were not dreaming. You were mocking. They're totally different things.

SUSANA. Saverio, don't be cruel!

SAVERIO. If somebody had told me a fortnight ago that there was a woman capable of plotting a joke like this, I would have been happy to meet her. Today, your capacity for pretence has turned against you. Who would trust you? There's something repulsive about you.

SUSANA. Saverio, be careful, don't say such unpleasant things.

SAVERIO. You and your friends are but the dregs of life. Could there be something worse than the indifference with which you laughed at a nobody?

SUSANA. That's horrible.

SAVERIO. Are you blaming me? I was the one who has been made a fool of.

SUSANA. I really regret it, Saverio. You do believe me, don't you?

SAVERIO. (*Coldly*) May be, may be not. You'll soon be hatching the next one. Your lack of scruple is beyond belief. You only seek to satisfy your whims. Me, on the other hand, you've destroyed me.

SUSANA. What are you going to do?

SAVERIO. What do you think I'll do? I'll go back to my old job.

SUSANA. Don't reject me, Saverio. Don't be unfair. Try to face it. How else can an innocent young girl get to know the heart of the man she wants to marry?

SAVERIO. Here we go again.

SUSANA. Do you think it was so ridiculous? It's the ends that matter, not the means. Saverio, you haven't played your part gracefully, but I haven't either. Go and ask the others what they think of a woman who can plot a farce like this? You'll see what they say. (SAVERIO *sits on the throne, tired*) You look tired! (SAVERIO *rests his head on his hands with his elbows on his knees*) I like you so much when you do that! Don't speak, darling. (*She runs her hand through his hair*) You're torn inside, I know. But if you leave me now, even if you lived a thousand years, you'd still regret this moment, you'll never forget you're little dove.

SAVERIO. (*Without looking up*) What a brave dove you are!

SUSANA. (*stroking his head*) You're offended, aren't you, darling. Oh, no, it's that you've just been born; and when you've just been everything hurts. Solitude has turned you into a beast. No woman has ever spoken to you like this before. The milk boy needed a shock to liberate the man. You'll never make another mistake.

SAVERIO. (*Rubbing his face*) It's really stuffy in here!

SUSANA. (*Standing by him*) I am the great girlfriend your heart was beating for. Look at me, my love. I'd like to wrap my coils around you, like a tropical snake.

SAVERIO. (*Instinctively stepping back to the sofa*) What's the whole snake thing about? (*Surprised*) Look at you eyes! There're like saucers!

SUSANA. My eyes are beautiful for you. Like twin suns. Because I love you, my dear Colonel. All my life I've looking for you. (*She launches herself on to the sofa next to him. She places her hand round his neck*)

SAVERIO. Careful! Somebody may come in.

SUSANA. Don't you like it when I get close to you?

SAVERIO. Are you still pulling my leg.

SUSANA. (*Sweetly*) Pulling you leg, my dearest? How can you say that Saverio?

SAVERIO. (*Angrily*) What is all this joke about? (*Lets go of her arm violently*)

SUSANA. Why do you treat me like this, my dear?

SAVERIO. There's something terrible in your eyes.

SUSANA. Let me lean on you. (*She hugs him again*)

SAVERIO. There's an evil look in your eyes. (*Tries to push her awayt*)

SUSANA. Don't be afraid, my dear. You're in shock.

SAVERIO (*Puzzled*) What's wrong with you? You're as white as a sheet.

SUSANA. (*Sweetly*) Are you afraid, my dear?

SAVERIO (*Jumping off the throne*) What are you hiding in your hand?

SUSANA. (*Suddenly still, standing on the platform*) You miserable cur!

SAVERIO. Susana! (*He suddenly understands and begins to shout*) This woman really is mad! Julia! Help!. (*SUSANA raised the gun she is holding*) Don't! Don't! Susana!

SCENE VIII

The sound of shots are heard. The guests hurry on stage. Saverio is lying on the stage.
JUAN, PEDRO, JULIA, etc.

CURTAIN

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