

IDEOLOGY AND COMMODITY FETISHISM: REINALDO ARENAS'S *OTRA VEZ EL MAR*

Reinaldo Arenas was an enemy of Fidel Castro and the revisionist communism associated with him. But this does not necessarily exclude the possibility of a creative engagement with Marxism in his works and a Marxist interpretation of them. In his autobiography *Antes que anochezca* Arenas denies having any political affiliation:

Por otra parte, nunca me he considerado ser ni de izquierda ni de derecha, ni quiero que se me catalogue bajo ninguna etiqueta oportunista y política; yo digo mi verdad, lo mismo que un judío que haya sufrido el racismo o un ruso que haya estado en un gulag, o cualquier ser humano que haya tenido ojos para ver las cosas tal como son; grito, luego, existo.¹

This apolitical stance can be regarded as an autobiographical figuration of self that conceals an engagement with Marxism that is most evident in Arenas's novels. As Sylvia Molloy has observed, "Spanish American autobiographers are most efficient self-censors who, within their life stories, map out silences that point to the untellable—and often tell what they feel cannot be told autobiographically in other, less compromising texts."² Arenas had no reason to be amicably disposed to the left, as he was treated like a pariah in Cuba, and like an outcast by pro-Castro leftists in the United States. Even though he had good reason to reject what he describes as the left in *Antes que anochezca*, the influence of Marxist thought is noticeable in much of his work. This may seem to be paradoxical in a writer who declared himself to be an enemy of communism, but what is unequivocally rejected in Arenas's texts is not Marxism as such, but what he considers to be the failed attempts to create communist societies in Cuba and elsewhere, and the supporters and apologists for these attempts. The end of the 20th century is once again a time of proletarian revolution that will produce renewed attempts to create communist societies. Within this context, the critique of revisionism contained in *Otra vez el mar* is particularly relevant.

Arenas was never comfortable with right wing members of the Cuban exile community who admired his anti-Castro stance, and the experience of living in the United States, after he escaped from Cuba in 1980 during the Mariel exodus, did not turn him into a supporter of the American way of life: "Mi nuevo

¹ Reinaldo Arenas, *Antes que anochezca*, Barcelona, Tusquets, 1992, p. 322.

² Sylvia Molloy, *At Face Value*, London, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 6.

mundo no estaba dominado por el poder político, pero sí por ese otro poder también siniestro: el poder del dinero. Después de vivir en este país por algunos años he comprendido que es un país sin alma porque todo está condicionado al dinero.”³ A major theme of Arenas’s work is the rejection of all forms of domination and exploitation that limit and repress the development of man. This includes capitalism as well as Cuban “communism” (which is really a form of capitalism).

Otra vez el mar continues a critique of the revolution that begins in Arenas’s *El mundo alucinante* (1969). A tendency in the critical literature on *Otra vez el mar* (Roberto Valero’s essay “Otra vez Arenas y el mar” (1990), or Francisco Soto’s book *Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonía* (1994), for example) has been to see in Arenas’s text a call for freedom from totalitarianism or hierarchical systems of power. However, other than in terms of opposition to Castro and the revolution, and sympathy for the victims of totalitarian repression (political dissidents, homosexuals, dissident artists, etc.), the political, class and gender based nature of this freedom is not specified. There is no consideration given to the possibility that *Otra vez el mar* attacks the revolution from a left wing perspective, or that it is a Marxist work.

In *Otra vez el mar*, which Arenas started to write in 1966, but was not published until 1982, the representation of social relations based on state capitalism makes explicit what in *El mundo alucinante* functions on the level of allegory. The following passages, from the section entitled *Privilegios del sistema* of the fourth canto of the second part of *Otra vez el mar*, all refer to structural elements of Cuban society that may be considered as deriving from capitalist social relations:

Un único propietario, el mismo sueldo, los productos más escasos y más caros.

...

La sustitución de las clases por *los niveles*.

...

La universidad, los automóviles, la vivienda, las playas y los viajes sólo para esbirros sutiles.

...

La legislación feudal, la producción esclavista, el comercio capitalista y la retórica comunista.⁴

In the fifth canto, the following description of the extraction of surplus value from the worker makes it clear that for the narrator, the state now occupies the role of the exploiter of the working class, formerly taken by the capitalist owners of the means of production:

³ Reinaldo Arenas, *Antes que anochezca*, Barcelona, Tusquets, 1992, p. 332.

⁴ Reinaldo Arenas, *Otra vez el mar*, Barcelona, Editorial Argos Vergera, 1982, pp. 309-10. Quotations from this edition can be found in parentheses in the text.

Pues bien: en el nuevo sistema, el comunismo, el obrero trabaja más que en cualquier otro, recibe menos, se le trata peor, y lo que finalmente puede adquirir ha de pagarlo más caro (ocho o diez veces por encima de su costo de producción y del precio anterior) siendo el producto de más baja calidad. Sin embargo, ya no hay capitalistas que le roben el fruto de su esfuerzo. ¿Qué ha sido pues, señor, de la plusvalía? Mencionarla es ya un acto subversivo... En realidad, vuelvo a repetirlo, no sería honesto negar que la técnica avanza que la "Historia marcha": Antes se le entregaba al estado el diezmo; la nueva clase (economista, al fin) ha comprendido que es mucho más práctico, rentable y hasta "revolucionario", abolir los impuestos, contribuciones, etc., y convertir al hombre en una suerte de letra de cambio *ad infinitum*. (328)

A mixture of communist rhetoric and capitalist commerce, referred to by the narrator on page 310, is an essential component of post-revolutionary Cuba. In order to understand why, there must be some discussion of Cuba's economic and social development under Castro's government during the period of time before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The relation of dependency Castro's Cuba entered into with the Soviet Union reinforced the pre-existing domination of the island's economy by the cultivation of sugar cane. In the 1960's the Cuban government utilized all possible resources to drastically increase the production of sugar in order to buy industrialization. The decision to maximize investment in the production of sugar was made because, as Che Guevara believed, it was the most profitable sector of the economy:

The entire economic history of Cuba has demonstrated that no other agricultural activity would give such returns as those yielded by the cultivation of sugar cane. At the onset of the Revolution, many of us were not aware of this basic economic fact, because a fetishistic idea connected sugar with our dependence on imperialism and with the misery in the rural areas, without analyzing the real causes, the relation to the unequal balance of trade.⁵

For Che Guevara, "the decisive feature of Cuba's dependency was external—to whom and for how much its sugar was sold."⁶ If enough sugar could be sold for a large enough price, the accumulated profit could be used to develop the forces of production and achieve socialism. But as Rudi Mambisa has observed, regardless of Cuba's trade relations before the revolution, dependency was already inherent in the organization of capital within Cuba itself:

Cuba did not develop an agriculture that could feed industrial workers and supply industry and an industry that could in turn supply agriculture and the rest of the domestic market. Instead, increasingly it became a country where practically nothing was manufactured and little even stockpiled. Almost everything it used came on the freighters, the ferries and the flights from the U.S., 150 kilometers away, and almost

⁵ Quoted by Rudi Mambisa, "Notes on the Political Economy of Cuba", *A World to Win*, (15) 1990, 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

everything it produced was shipped back to the U.S. on the return trip. It was said that Cuba's manufacturing district was in New York, its warehouse district in Miami and its telephone exchange connected Havana and the U.S. far more than anywhere else in Cuba.⁷

A real liberation of the forces of production would have required diversifying the agricultural and industrial base of this economy to meet the needs of the Cuban people and achieve a measure of self sufficiency. Instead of relying on the working class to eliminate the deformed economy and society that imperialism had created in Cuba, the revolutionary leaders "looked for something that could substitute for the masses and class struggle."⁸ They tried to buy communism by selling sugar to the Soviet bloc and incurring in debt led development.

The cash that Castro sought was obtained by "preserving and strengthening the ... semicolonial economy that had led to the Cuban revolution in the first place."⁹ The land of the latifundia was not divided and distributed equally among the peasants because it was decided that this would lower the production of sugar cane, which was the crop most suitable for large bureaucratically-run state farms. Thus Cuba—in contrast to revolutionary China—skipped "the stage of agrarian revolution and [went] directly to 'socialism' by turning the latifundia into state-run enterprises."^{10, 11} In carrying out this policy, no consideration was given to carrying out mass line, that is, as Mambisa has observed, "of uniting with and giving leadership to the advanced desires of the exploited masses, which were much more in accord with what Cuba really needed for its liberation than Castro's ideas."¹² With regard to the question of mass line, in his essay *Notes on the Political Economy of Cuba*, Mambisa quotes a revealing conversation between Castro and Rene Dumont, a French agronomist who accompanied Castro on a tour of Cuba's countryside during the period of time

⁷ Rudi Mambisa, "Notes on the Political Economy of Cuba", *A World to Win*, (14) 1989, 71.

⁸ Revolutionary Communist Party USA, *Cuba: The Evaporation of a Myth*, Chicago, RCP Publications, 1983, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Rudi Mambisa, "Notes on the Political Economy of Cuba", *A World to Win*, (14) 1989, p. 84.

¹¹ Arenas's criticism of the revolution in *Otra vez el mar* has much in common with Maoism. Maoists believe that in order for socialist construction to succeed, it's not enough to transform the economic base and put the ownership of the means of production in state hands. In order to transform the exploitative relationships of the old society, interpersonal relations, between men and women for example, must also be revolutionized. In *Otra vez el mar* close attention is paid to this interpersonal level of social relations and to the complicity of the state in preserving the subjugation of women in a machista culture. These exploitative relations are examined within the context of the effect of dependency relations on the economy and society of Cuba. Because theirs was no agrarian revolution, there was no way to feed the people or develop the economy without maintaining the domination of Cuba's economy by the cultivation of sugar for sale on the imperialist market. In *Otra vez el mar* the effect of this dependency relation is expressed in terms of the material degradation of the productive capacity of the Cuban economy. This can also be interpreted from a Maoist perspective.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

when the question of what to do with the latifundia was being discussed by the regime; "My advice was asked for, but not that of the workers and peasants who were to work on these enterprises. I was even forbidden to discuss it with them. 'These people are illiterate and their ideas are usually pretty conservative,' I was told. 'It's our job to lead them.'"¹³ Within Cuban society,

... the enthusiasm of the masses for changing the old society was increasingly perverted so that the role of the working class, rather than revolutionizing society, was reduced to working hard to produce the necessary cash. Thus the basic capitalist relation of production was preserved and strengthened—the subordination of the working class to production for profit. Rather than a new socialist society, and still less communism, this was, in essence, the same old society with new masters. The worker's role was to work hard. The Cuban leaders more and more became bureaucratic state capitalists dependent on a foreign imperialist power.¹⁴

The state capitalism of the Cuban ruling class can be inferred from a reading of *Otra vez el mar* as a historical precondition necessary for the depiction in their historical specificity within the text, of social relations based on the capitalist mode of production within a society only partially transformed by revolution. In this sense the direction of reference is from the text to the Real with the proviso that history, "as an absent cause ... is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious."¹⁵

Otra vez el mar begins with a description of the ceaseless transformation of the appearance of the sea. The substitution of one color for another is reminiscent of the opening of *El mundo alucinante*, where the text contradicts itself repeatedly within the space of a few lines. As with *El mundo alucinante* the appearance of a relativistic perspective created by the opening of *Otra vez el mar* will be undermined by the representation of the subject's relationship to a reality that forms a structured whole. In the first part of the novel, narrated by Héctor's wife, who is not named, narrative fragments (some more realistic than others) that often take place in disparate and non-sequential times, alternate with dream sequences. Part two, narrated by Héctor, a writer, adds poetry, a short story and a variety of short texts. The intertextual relation between both parts of the novel enacts on a large scale a return to the same that unifies the diverse components of this text. This kaleidoscopic variety serves to underscore to what extent all aspects of this textual system revolve, like Héctor, around the impact of politics on existence:

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁴ Revolutionary Communist Party USA, *Cuba: The Evaporation of a myth*, p. 14.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 384.

Mira. Ah, mira
 cómo te has convertido en un
 ser
 politizado
 girando enajenado
 alrededor del tema común
 el gran tema
 el único tema posible
 ya. (396)

Héctor and his wife, although they are not revolutionaries, do express, in certain parts of *Otra vez el mar* the desire to radically alter the social order they live in. Because of limitations of space, these components of the text will not be discussed in this reading. Rather, the focus will be on those aspects of this difficult, complex novel that lead back to an all too familiar reality: a society permeated by and subjected to commodity relations and alienated labor.

Like Servando (the protagonist of *El mundo alucinante*), Héctor is a rebel, but he is also a product of the social relations the system he is rebelling against has preserved from the pre-revolutionary period. This is quite evident in what transpires during the course of the six-day vacation into which the first part of the novel is divided. During this time Héctor's wife does most of the work around the house, takes care of the baby, and passively acquiesces as he fulfills the role of a sexual predator, seducing a teen-age boy in the process. Although Héctor is a homosexual, the subordinate role of his wife in their marriage can be understood in terms of the machismo of a male dominated society, as has been observed by Alicia Rodríguez.¹⁶ As a homosexual, Héctor is himself a member of a group that is oppressed by this society.

A basic difference between Héctor and Servando can be understood in terms of Louis Althusser's definition of Ideology as "a 'Representation' of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence."¹⁷ The use of the term imaginary here is an allusion to Jacques Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Functions of the I," in which he argues that an infant, reacting to its image in a mirror, feels a sense of unity that it will never really recapture in later years. In this imaginary condition, no real distinction between subject and object has yet set in; the infant identifies with its own image feeling itself at once within and in front of the mirror. The influence of this imaginary register persists later on in life, into the subject's relation to reality. By finding a deceptively coherent image of itself reflected in the mirror of a dominant ideological discourse, the subject is able to attain a

¹⁶ Alicia Rodríguez, "La mujer en la obra de Reinaldo Arenas", *Reinaldo Arenas: recuerdo y presencia*, Ed. Reinaldo Sánchez, Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1994, p. 156.

¹⁷ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", *Lenin and Philosophy*, Trans. Ben Brewster, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971, p. 162.

false kind of unity. Within the confines of this alienated being it is able to act in ways which are deemed socially appropriate. "Through ideology, Althusser remarks, society 'interpellates' or 'hails' us, appears to single us out as uniquely valuable and addresses us by name."¹⁸

Héctor's imaginary relation to reality is more conflictive and unstable than Servando's.¹⁹ One reason for this is that the female narrator of the first part of the novel, Héctor's wife, can also be understood as part of the fragmented ego of the subject Héctor. The following passage attests to their common identity; "Y ya hemos hablado tanto de lo mismo ... que ya no sé cuándo habla él o cuándo hablo yo, que ya no sé si ahora pienso o hablo yo, o es él quien piensa o habla, y yo, sencillamente, escucho o interpreto" (107). Héctor identifies himself as the real narrator of *Otra vez el mar* when he reveals, at the end of the novel, that his wife and his child are products of his imagination, as he is alone in his car and this has always been the case. The doubling of the subject rules out the possibility of a unified image in a concept of identity based on reflection. In the imaginary register the narrative voice of part one will be revealed as a mask for a subject whose image is not well reflected in the mirror of the dominant ideology.

Héctor's role as a dominant male in a heterosexual relationship is acceptable to a "neurotically macho Cuban society"²⁰ that rejects homosexuality. His wife's submission to the role of an exploited, passive woman complements the self her husband adopts in order to flourish in this society. But she is also another version of Héctor, an alternate self and the projection of that self into a relationship with its double that takes the form of a marriage. Throughout *Otra vez el mar* these two use their constant complaints about the revolution to effectively block any emotional intimacy between them; "Continuamos en silencio o hablamos sólo para criticar a los otros, a la política, al tiempo. Nos aprovechamos de la horrible situación general para evadir nuestra horrible situación particular" (132-33). The stronger the subject's denunciation of the system is, the greater the alienation of the self from its other becomes:

Hoy prohibieron tal programa, hoy suprimieron tal revista, hoy racionaron tal producto, hoy prendieron a tal personaje, hoy fusilaron tantas personas. Hoy, hoy, así, así, hasta que lo terrible se vuelve monótono, y uno no busca el porqué, la explicación o la reparación de la injusticia, sino, ya solamente, un sitio donde meter la cabeza, respirar, y verlo todo.... Y ahora los altoparlantes describen ... "el grandioso desfile que en estos momentos cruza frente a la tribuna presidencial". ¡Oh Dios!, ¡Oh Dios! ¿A quién voy a invocar? ¿Quién podría salvarnos? Me golpeo la nariz contra la espalda de Héctor quien, de repente, se ha detenido junto con todo el mundo.... Héctor, digo, y,

¹⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology*, London, Verso, 1991, pp. 142-43.

¹⁹ For an article on the role of ideology within *El mundo alucinante* see Cacheiro, *El mundo alucinante: History and Ideology*, *Hispania* 79.4 (1996), 762-71.

²⁰ Roberto González Echevarría, "An Outcast of the Island", *New York Times* 24 Oct. 1993, sec. 7, 1+.

al volverme, descubro que ha desaparecido. Se ha marchado sin haberme dicho nada. Miro para la arena y sólo veo la marca de su cuerpo. Alzo la vista casi asustada: el muchacho también se ha ido de la playa. Los dos se han esfumado. (80)

The female character's meditation on her hapless lot concludes quite literally, after a leap of time and space, with the alienation of the corporal presence of her husband, who has disappeared, leaving behind the imprint of his absent body in the sand. In order to understand the interaction between the self, the double, language and form in this passage, it will be necessary to begin with an examination of the subject's belief system within the context of social praxis, as represented in the text.

The subject is aware that after the revolution she still lives in a class-divided society that is ruled by a privileged elite; "pero resulta ... que nosotros, que tanto despreciábamos aquello, vemos ahora las mismas humillaciones, los mismos privilegios, la misma miseria..." (71-72). This is a competitive society in which a measure of success is the individuals' ability to exploit others; "Ahora todos se lanzan, todos quieren conseguir un puesto, ocupar un cargo; todos quieren salvarse a costa, como siempre, de los demás" (78). As is to be expected in a system that preserved the basic capitalist relation of production—the subordination of the working class to production for profit—the commodity form plays a well defined role within the context of social life. Material goods become the exchange value equivalent for an alienated self: "Vendida el alma, aquí está la casa; paredes, muebles, cuartos, que entre el joven heroico, el hombre nuevo.... Ahora que los problemas, digamos fundamentales, están resueltos —casa, comida, auto, sueldo— podemos dedicarnos plenamente a hacernos la vida intolerable" (78-79). The alienation of the self occurs in a social relation where workers are "reduced from masters of the production process to mere cogs in the wheel of production—in effect they become wage-slaves, subordinate to a production process dominated by an elite lording it over them";²¹ "Ya lo único que cuenta es trabajar y obedecer como un animal, reducir nuestra mentalidad a la mentalidad de las bestias, y si no lo logras peor para ti..." (78). The social characteristics of these relations of production, in which workers have no power in deciding how the means of production are to be used in satisfying their individual and collective needs, are transformed by the subject into objective characteristics of the commodity form. Material goods, as the embodiment of alienated labor, are invested with the power to compensate for the dehumanization that takes place in the process of production. For the subject, the commodity form is capable of acquiring a religious significance, as in the following description of a house:

²¹ Bob Avakian, *Phony Communism is Dead... Long Live Real Communism*, Chicago, RCP Publications, 1992, p. 98.

Esta es la casa, dice. Entramos, y no hay ese gran canto coral que escuché una vez desde una iglesia.... No hay ese canto típico, propicio para los grandes acontecimientos... Pero hay sillones, hay una mesa con cuatro sillas, dos habitaciones, cocina grande con cuatro hornillas, sala y portal que da al mismísimo Malecón. Esta es la casa, dice. Y ahora, efectivamente, se oye el canto. Nuestra casa, pienso, mientras palpo los muebles, toco las puertas, admiro las paredes, aprieto las llaves. Y pienso: cuánto hemos tenido que padecer, que suplicar, humillarnos, aparentar, pedir (simulando que no pedimos, que somos desinteresados), para, al fin, poder decir: *Esta es la casa*. Ahora solamente tendremos que pagar una mensualidad... (76-77)

This association of the commodity form with religion is reminiscent of the passage on commodity fetishism in volume one of *Capital*:

... the commodity form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.²²

The fetishistic relationship to the commodity form has the effect of validating the social relations the subject must enter into in order to obtain commodities. This validation only takes place if the system is capable of delivering the material goods for which it creates a need in the first place. Although the subject in *Otra vez el mar* is always criticizing the system, he has "sold his soul," turning himself into a commodity in the process, because, for a time, he believes the system can deliver in terms of material goods and other social benefits. In this process, the social relations he vociferously denounces are enacted in his marriage and in his relationships with others. These denunciations are the subject's way of projecting onto the system what also exists in himself. In this way he represses the knowledge of the extent to which he participates in what he denounces. Héctor complains about being compelled to work and obey like an animal, but never considers that by not sharing the responsibility for taking care of his home, and using his wife to pass himself off as a respectable member of society, he is submitting her to a form of exploitation, of which she is well aware:

... veo, claramente, que soy sólo una justificación, algo que hay que aceptar para no perecer, una tradición (una obligación) más del sistema implacable, una regla hipócrita que no se puede infringir... Las ventajas, además de llegar a la casa y encontrarlo todo

²² Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, Trans. Ben Fowkes, New York, Vintage Books, 1977, p. 165.

preparado, las ventajas de tener alguien a quien hablarle si lo deseas, o no hablarle si no quieres; alguien a quien exhibir cuando sea prudente —imprescindible— hacerlo, alguien de quien hablar cuando se está en los círculos de los amigos oficiales y de quien olvidarse cuando se está entre los amigos verdaderos. (134-35)

With the teenager whom he seduces, Héctor is physically and psychologically abusive, acting out with government sanctioned brutality, as he simultaneously warns his lover about the dire future that lies in store for him:

Rápido salgo de su cuerpo. Salto al centro de la explanada. Lo contemplo, por primera vez se muestra confundido. Comencé a reirme a carcajadas. Camino a su alrededor, riéndome. Me planto ante él y lo abofeteo. —¿Qué te habías creído?, le digo. Y vuelvo a golpearlo. —¿Crees que desde el principio no me di cuenta de lo que eras? ... Óyeme, atiéndeme: me das lástima. ¿No sabes entonces, qué horror te espera? ¿No sabes que ni siquiera podrás decir ese horror? ¿No sabes que nunca podrás ser tú mismo, sino una máscara, una vergüenza, una piedra de burla y escándalo y de venganza para los otros, y de incesante humillación para ti? Nada más que para sobrevivir tendrás que traicionar y negar precisamente lo que te justifica y eres. (352-53)

From a different perspective, the unsatisfactory relationship between Héctor and his wife can be internalized at the level of the self. She, in her capacity as a double, represents a part of himself that he has cast off for, in the final analysis, political reasons (the Cuban government persecuted homosexuals and reinforced social prejudice against them) in the process of self betrayal and denial that he finds necessary for survival. What he rejects is assuming a feminine identity, becoming a drag queen, as a way of expressing his homosexuality. In part one of *Otra vez el mar* the masculine false self, the subject who furtively engages in homosexual relations, is always separated from the other, never allowed to be in one and the same person:

Héctor, digo, y, al volverme, descubro que ha desaparecido. Se ha marchado sin haberme dicho nada. Miro para la arena y sólo veo la marca de su cuerpo. Alzo la vista casi asustada: el muchacho también se ha ido de la playa. Los dos se han esfumado. (80)

Language, as used by the subject, becomes a mechanism that keeps this separation in place, by evading all attempts in the first part of the novel to bridge the gulf that separates the two selves. The separation of the self from the other is reflected in the form of the text on several levels. For example; the abrupt changes of time and place in part one, the contrast between the wife and Héctor as the narrators of, respectively, the first and second parts of the novel, the stylistic disparity between these parts, and the omissions of events in the first part that are dealt with in the second part. The centrifugal tendency that splits the self from the other and the text into contrasting or complementary structural components is set in motion by the role of politics as the center of gravity the

text obsessively returns to.

The passage I have quoted previously that ends with the above quotation, is preceded and followed by a description of a parade in which Héctor and his wife take part. This parade is reminiscent of the procession in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe in *El mundo alucinante*, as they are both the occasion for a collective representation of the constitutive elements that make up Cuban and Mexican society:

Pasan los estudiantes, marchando y levantando enormes carteles de apoyo y agradecimiento; pasan los obreros agrupados por sindicatos. Esos son los seleccionados para desfilar.... Y ya pasa el ejército, sonando sus fanfarrias, exhibiendo sus armas, provocando un gran estruendo con instrumentos que parecen embestir amenazantes. ¿Quién se resiste a no desfilar? ¿Quién no está aquí, presente, aplaudiendo? Todos quieren ahora abrirse paso, ver, llegar hasta el mismo contén de la avenida. (79-80)

This parade, it should be noted, occurs in the heat of the afternoon and in the presence of Fidel Castro, to whom it would seem that the narrator, in this case Héctor, attributes a God-like omnipotence when he surmises that he might be saying the following to himself: “*Sí, sí, aplaudan, aplaudan porque están en mis manos y puedo, cuando quiera, abrirles a cada uno su expediente y aniquilarlo...*” (79).

Thirteen pages later, the female narrator has a dream in which she sees God, the Virgin Mary and a troop of angels walk on the ocean, board an airplane and depart. These religious figures can be identified as imaginary representations of Fidel Castro, the Cuban revolution and Soviet advisers in Cuba (agronomists, economists, etc.). The parade of religious figures is set off with the following line; “De entre la claridad percibo ahora como el estruendo de un canto coral ...” (93). The term “canto coral” echoes the female narrator’s use of this expression on p. 76; “Esta es la casa, dice. Entramos, y no hay ese gran canto coral que escuché una vez desde una iglesia...” Here “canto coral” signifies a fetishistic relation to the commodity form arising out of its role as the exchange value equivalent for alienated labor. The repetition of this expression in the course of the dream is an indication that this dream is about the subject’s relationship to the ideology of a political system that held out the promise of fulfilling his desire for material goods. The abundance and fertility of the ocean, which is the setting of the dream, suggests that the desire for commodities can be fulfilled. According to Roberto Valero, this dream signifies that even God, the Virgin Mary and the angels abandoned Cuba (112). This may seem to be true at a first approximation, but it does not fully take into account the relationship of the dream to the text of *Otra vez el mar*, and how the ideological content of this dream creates a layer of meaning that contradicts this interpretation.

God represents Castro. In the parade Héctor attributes to Castro complete power over the destiny of his subjects; they are in his hands and he can

“annihilate” all of them. The clothes God is wearing (work clothes; “pantalones de mecánico”) signify the dictatorship of the proletariat. Being in the imaginary in an ideological sense implies recognizing, and being recognized by, a Subject (the dominant ideological signifiers with which the individual identifies) who validates the subject’s existence as an individual, thus the subject is sure he sees God and the Virgin; “Pero sé bien que son ellos; no por ese gran canto coral que ahora vuelve a resonar.... Es por esa sensación de soledad y renuncia, que está más allá de lo que mis sufrimientos podrían concebir ...” (94). The religious vision, like the parade, occurs in the heat of the afternoon and it also assumes the form of a parade; “Ahora los ángeles se organizan en una larga y perfecta fila, como si fueran a ejecutar una parada militar. Así se inicia de nuevo la marcha” (95). The angels do not carry religious symbols of any kind, however they do carry some kind of instrument; “No son palios, ni cruces, ni ningún otro tipo de estandarte religioso. Semejan pedazos de madera que de pronto se ensanchan desproporcionadamente, garfios que al final se abren como platillos ...” (96). These drag hooks refer to the interpellatory effect of ideology on the subject. God leads the parade, oblivious to the activities of the angels, who must periodically retrieve Mary from the sea that she keeps falling into. Nevertheless, when the angels stop moving, God and the Virgin also stop, giving the narrator the impression that the angels are guiding them. The use of a woman to represent the revolution is reminiscent of the nationalistic identification of the nation with a woman common in 19th century Latin American literature. Mary’s figural value is enhanced by her frequent dunkings: a reminder that the fortunes of the revolution are subject to the vicissitudes of fate and the enmity of the USA. But the Soviet advisers, who wear tacky clothes (rubber pants and plastic shirts), speak a language the narrator cannot understand (“una extraña jerigonza que es como una especie de un corto cacareo” (94)) and do not pay much attention to God, are steadfast in their support of the revolution: “Por lo demás, aun cuando sacan a la Virgen del agua, no veo en sus rostros ningún gesto de compasión, más bien parecen cumplir disciplinados con un deber” (95). What the imagery of nationalism does not conceal here is the relation of dependency between Cuba and the Soviet Union symbolized by the angels repeatedly coming to the rescue of the Virgin and guiding the parade, and a relation between the sexes based on the reality of a male dominated culture. It is a woman who is immersed in water as a symbol of the tribulations of the mother land. The head of state (a man) has the luxury of not even having to be aware of this; “Dios va unos pasos más adelante y no parece advertir nada; ni siquiera ahora que la Virgen se vuelve a hundir (esta vez desapareciendo bajo el agua) mira hacia atrás. Da la impresión de un viejo solitario y aburrido” (93-94). The majority of the advisers are men, further contributing to the impression of male dominance: “Por un momento, miro a los ángeles. La mayoría de ellos son hombres (es decir, tienen aspecto de

hombre) pocos tienen figura y rostro de mujer, y aun éstos vienen vestidos con ropas masculinas” (95). The fusion of religious and nationalistic imagery, and the theme of male domination, represent the pull of the past, and point to what is reactionary within the revolution. At the conclusion of the dream, as the religious figures climb into an airplane, the color of the letters on its side combined with the corporate concept of “company” (“A un costado pueden leerse, en letras rojas y brillantes, unas siglas que no son más que el nombre de la compañía a la cual pertenece la nave” (96)) leaves no doubt that, ideologically speaking, the airplane belongs to revisionism.

The role of the Virgin within the dream is not brought fully into focus until she responds to the entreaties of the narrator, who wants to join in the parade;

¡Espérenme! ¡Espérenme!, les digo gritando y braceo con todas las fuerzas. Están de espaldas, inmóviles. Lentamente, la Virgen va girando el cuello; al fin me mira. Espérame, le grito. A través del agua que voy levantando veo a la Virgen llevarse una mano a la boca, como aterrada. En seguida me da la espalda y echa a andar. (95)

Mary’s reaction is intelligible as the revolution’s rejection of the homosexual self behind the mask of the female heterosexual self. By reacting to the subject as a result of perceiving him, she provides him with information about his image, fulfilling the role of a mirror in the imaginary. The ideological content of this dream exists “in and through the human subject”; “Ideology is subject centered or ‘anthropomorphic’: it causes us to view the world as somehow naturally oriented to ourselves.”²³ “Viewed psychologically, [ideology] is less a system of articulated doctrines than a set of images, symbols and occasionally concepts which we ‘live’ at an unconscious level.”²⁴ In all of these respects the dream conforms to Althusser’s theory of ideology. However, as far as being interpellated by the dominant ideology, this is not the case. What occurs is an ironic role reversal; the subject is the one who does the hailing here, only to be rejected. He wants to get on the airplane and be a part of what he sees, but the image of the homosexual self cannot be unified in the imaginary, as it does not reflect well in the mirror of the dominant ideology. By witnessing the airplane’s fiery crash, the subject exerts a measure of retribution for being rejected, but that cannot prevent the dawning of a new age in which the ideology of phony communism will be spread around the world (*Otra vez el mar* was written during the cold war):

Todo queda iluminado por el resplandor del incendio. La claridad, de tan intensa, borra los contornos. Yo misma me voy diluyéndome, desintegrándome en ese inmenso resplandor que me ciega. ¡No me dejen! ¡no me dejen!, vuelvo a gritarle a la claridad que sigue avanzando. ¡Aquí! ¡Aquí!, grito mientras braceo. Pero ya soy sólo una voz

²³ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology*, p. 142.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-49.

en medio del resplandor del cual ahora comienzan a brotar millones de pequeños aviones amarillos que, en inmenso enjambre, se agrupan produciendo un estruendo intolerable. (96-97)

In order for Héctor to be accepted by the oppressively sexist and homophobic society to which he belongs, he must continue to sell himself out by participating in the system of heterosexual male domination of women and homosexuals. Héctor is aware that he has betrayed himself. His awareness and his anger, do not, however, result in a rebellion against the system in terms of active political resistance, or a change in his interpersonal relationships, and for this he pays a heavy price, as is underscored by his suicide at the end of the novel.

A striking characteristic of the interpersonal relationships in *Otra vez el mar* is the failure of the characters to say to each other what should be said at the appropriate time. Héctor's wife, for example, never confronts him about his relationship with his young lover. Similarly, she fails to apprise the boy's mother of the situation. The mother, in turn, does not acknowledge that anything out of the ordinary is going on between Héctor and her son, even though there are indications, and in a more general sense, she fails to prepare her son to deal adequately with an abusive sexual predator like Héctor. Although Héctor's wife is well aware of the mother's inadequacies, and of the imminent danger to her son, she says nothing to her:

¿Pero por qué no se buscó ella un marido? Un hombre que la golpeará o tolerará, un amante, un "cortejo", como se diría en su tiempo, cualquier cosa. ¿Por qué depositar tanta ternura, tanta necesidad, todo el tiempo en un pobre muchacho de diecisiete (¿diecisiete dijo?) años? ¡Basta! Basta ya de boberías ¡Fuera! Ni una palabra más sobre su hijo. Lo sé todo: es la perfección, el candor, la pureza, un ángel bajado del cielo. Pero oiga, está usted cometiendo un grave error, está usted cometiendo un crimen con esa criatura. Edúquele de otra forma. Dígale: *hijo saca las garras, mira, esa es la vida*. Y señale para cualquier sitio, cualquier lugar le será apropiado. Pero no digo nada y ella habla y habla. Mi hijo dice, mi hijo dice...¡Basta! (108)

The character structure of the female narrator is simultaneously aggressive, yet afraid of opening up to others. In the competitive and exploitative society portrayed in *Otra vez el mar*, intimacy is a sign of weakness, making the subject vulnerable to the predations of others. As for the mother, she prefers to make her son excessively dependent on her by smothering him with overprotection, to remarrying and becoming instead the object of abuse from a husband who would, as the narrator puts it, "beat her up and tolerate her." She covers up her unhealthy relationship to her son, which is really an expression of hostility, by droning on about how wonderful he is. These characters exist inside of their own atomistic self-centered selves. For them language is a means of covering up their exploitative relationships to others, or a means of warding off the incursions of others.

In the preceding passage I have quoted, the narrator thinks the boy's mother

should tell her child to take out his "claws." Eight pages later the narrator has a dream in which she sees an old woman do as she would have the boy do; "La mujer de rostro deteriorado levanta una mano a la altura de mi rostro. ¡Mira!, dice. Sus uñas crecen, llegan al cielo, vuelven a descender. Esto es para ti, me responde, y suelta una carcajada" (118). This dream transforms the destructive interpersonal relationships of the characters in *Otra vez el mar* into a collective portrait of human bestiality. The dream begins with a description of an immense bread line that stretches through the devastated city of La Habana. The line is kept in single file and straight by means of the brutality of the soldiers who supervise it. It moves through a bone-dry landscape filled with the skeletons of animals and men. Those who are on this line are themselves parched with thirst and some of them evaporate. The bread line, considered as a metaphorical representation of society, is kept in single file not through self discipline, as in the dream of the religious procession, but through the repression of the state. The linear configuration is an expression of the isolation of the self within the community, as it limits the possibility of interpersonal relationships. This self is as arid as the desiccated landscape it traverses. The sea that was the setting of the dream of the religious procession holds the promise of life. Here, not having found sustenance through interpersonal relationships or work, the collective self is in immediate proximity to death, and is itself empty and evanescent. A periodic repetition of the word "clan" heightens the readers awareness of the passage of time that has led from the promise of the "canto coral" that initiates the earlier dream to the bleakness of the present one, set in the future. In a system where products rule over man, the product over the producer, but in which material goods are exceedingly scarce, the woman with transformable nails sets off a rebellion by shouting "¡Chevrolet!":

De repente, la mujer de las uñas variables se retuerce, se desgarrá un seno, se para en punta; toma aliento. ¡Chevrolet!, grita con voz que retumba sobre el murmullo. Todos quedamos paralizados. Las fornicaciones suspendidas, las discusiones en vilo, los rascabuchadores con las manos inmóviles, las ofensas sin pronunciarse, los puños detenidos. Los soldados de la contrasusurración también permanecen estáticos, los otros, aguardando sus órdenes, también petrificados. "¡Chevrolet!", vuelve a repetir la mujer; salta de la cola, se afirma sobre la tierra crepitante detrás de las llamas. "¡Aire acondicionado!", grita ahora con voz más potente y se desgarrá el otro seno. De la cola empieza a alzarse un murmullo.... El murmullo sube de golpe. Los soldados quedan otra vez lívidos e inmóviles. Una mujer desencabada maúlla en cuatro patas. "¡Lavadoras eléctricas!", grita, y se lanza de cabeza sobre la pira. Por un momento las llamas parecen apagarse. "¡Camisetas Taca!", dice ahora un hombre alto y mutilado. "¡Camisetas Taca!", grita a la vez que saca un largo clavo de su pantalón harapiento y empieza a taladrarse la frente. "¡Taca! ¡Taca! ¡Taca!", repite entre estertores. (121-22)

Everyone on the bread line becomes involved in the rebellion and, as they recite a litany of consumer products ranging from foodstuffs to a diversity of

manufactured items, they continue to mutilate themselves, and eventually each other:

"¡Un par de patines con ruedas de goma!", grita un niño golpeándose el pecho y saltando alrededor de la mujer de las uñas variables. *"¡Muñecas Lily!"*, grita una niña en medio del resplandor mordiéndole el tobillo a una anciana. *"¡Zapatos Ingelmo!"*, dice un hombre, de apariencia respetable aunque desgarbado, saltando descalzo en un solo pie y autodegollándose.... *"¡Jamón! ¡Jamón! ¡Jamón!"*, gritan recíprocamente las dos viejas tirándose de las orejas y pateándose el estómago. *"¡Pantalones Pitusa!"*, proclaman varios adolescentes, mientras se aniquilan a puñetazos. *"¡Calzoncillos atléticos!"*, dice ahora muchacho-cara-de-piedra y le retuerce el cuello al viejo marica que expira repitiendo: *"¡Crema Pons! ¡Crema Pons! ¡Crema Pons!"*... (122)

At the conclusion of the rebellion, all of La Habana is destroyed. The income generated by the Cuban economy was not used to satisfy consumer demand by importing the kind of goods mentioned in the preceding passages (most of which were not produced in Cuba) on a large scale, as so much of this income was diverted to the production of sugar. The more land and resources were devoted to this purpose, the less was available for investment in other forms of agriculture, light industry and heavy industry, which could have formed the basis for a self-reliant socialist economy that would have been more responsive to the needs of the people. For the subject, the domination of Cuba's economy by sugar is a reality that will continue long into the future:

Prendo la radio *¡Aplicando los métodos y las orientaciones de nuestro Comandante en Jefe, llegaremos a los diez millones de toneladas de azúcar en el próximo 1970...!*
¡En 1960, en 1970, en 1980!... De manera que, en efecto, existe el tiempo. Al menos para ellos. Mañana, pasado, dentro de un mes, dentro de un siglo. (63)

Within this plantation economy "el obrero trabaja más que en cualquier otro [sistema], recibe menos, se le trata peor, y lo que finalmente puede adquirir ha de pagarlo más caro ..." (328); the basic capitalist relation of production is preserved. In this system the leadership of the economy is not in the hands of workers; the worker is not the master of the production process; work becomes inimical to the development of the self and the community. Without self-development there is no transformation of consciousness; material goods become necessary to fill the void created by the alienation of the self. Thus, even as the people rebel against the system, they engage in acts of self-mutilation and attack each other, as their rebellion is in the name of the commodity form that signifies their enslavement to the system.

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