

EL PORTERO: THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

Interpretemos la realidad profundamente,
es decir, tal como es.

Reinaldo Arenas, *El portero*

El portero is Reinaldo Arenas's most meticulously structured and carefully finished novel. Written in New York City, and published shortly before his death in 1990, there is reason to see it as a final summation of his political and philosophical thought.¹ The novel has some of the characteristics of a fable, with animal characters speaking and acting like human beings. These animals take turns delivering a series of monologues that conform to Wolfgang Kayser's formulation that a fable or parable should be of a persuasive, argumentative and comparative nature.² Given that *El portero* conforms in this way to the genre of the fable, a question that arises is what are these animals arguing about? A single reading of this novel will suffice to affirm that they are searching for liberty: the freedom to escape from their human masters and create a society that fulfills their needs. Aside from this generalization, the monologues create an initial impression of equally valid expressions of individualities having little in common, other than their right to exist. In this essay I will demonstrate how these animals find freedom by means of creating a communist utopia. In this sense *El portero* is the opposite of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, a fable where animals lose their freedom in the attempt to create a communist society.³

It might seem paradoxical to affirm that the influence of Marxism prevails in the work of a writer who declared himself to be an enemy of communism. Nevertheless the political thought that can be extrapolated from Arenas's work is rational, systematic and dialectically materialist. In a word it is Marxist.⁴ Arenas criticized the Cuban revolution for not living up to the ideals of Marxism. He was also a critic of capitalism, which in his work is identified with revisionism or phony communism. In Arenas's earlier novels the Marxist content is less obvious than in *El portero*; nevertheless it is a characteristic of his

¹ *El Portero* was initially published in a French translation in 1988, *Le portier*, Paris, Presses de la Renaissance. Two editions of *El portero* in Spanish were published before Arenas's death, Málaga, Ediciones Dador, 1989 and Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1990.

² Wolfgang Kayser, *Interpretación y análisis de la obra literaria*, 4th ed., Madrid, Gredos, 1961.

³ George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, New York, Knopf, 1993.

⁴ For a Marxist interpretation of Arenas' works see Cacheiro, *Reinaldo Arenas: una apreciación política*, Lanham, International Scholars Publications, 2000.

work from *Celestino antes del alba* onwards.⁵ In that novel the narrator's family is represented as a microcosm of the exploitative and repressive social relations of rural prerevolutionary Cuba. *El mundo alucinante* can be read as a symbolic structure that refers to the interrelationship between ideology, society and the bourgeois revolutionary subject in Castro's Cuba.⁶ *Otra vez el mar* deals with commodity fetishism and contains a Marxist critique of the political economy of Cuba.⁷ The acknowledgement of Arenas's relationship to Marxism has been repressed by some of those who have written about this writer, for understandable reasons, as many of them are, like myself, Cuban Americans, and by Arenas himself, who would be the last person to admit he was a Marxist. But it must not be forgotten that he went to fight with the revolutionary forces in the Sierra Maestra, was educated by the revolution and was sympathetic to its cause. He turned against the revolution when the repressive state capitalism of Castro's government became evident and he was persecuted as a homosexual. Arenas may have seen *El portero* as a final opportunity to express deeply held political and philosophical convictions in novelistic form. Why at this time in his life—if my thesis is correct—does he express these convictions in terms of a communist fable? Could Arenas's experience of life in a third-world country, and of economic deprivation and discrimination in the third world within Manhattan have something to do with this? In his autobiography *Antes que anochezca*, Arenas relates that Lázaro Gómez, a Cuban immigrant who was a close friend of his, and was a doorman, was a source of inspiration for *El portero*. In New York City, Gómez spent some time in a psychiatric hospital as a result of a nervous breakdown. Arenas's description of this episode suggests he felt he had some things in common with Gómez: "Ya no éramos los mismos; habíamos visto el horror de un hospital en Nueva York; la locura, la miseria, el maltrato, la discriminación".⁸ Arenas describes his friend's job as being "uno de los mejores del mundo";⁹ in conjunction with the passage previously quoted, this expresses a feeling of identification with proletarian class-consciousness based on the shared experience of economic deprivation and racial discrimination. For Arenas the experience of life in the United States may well have had a radicalizing effect on a political sensibility that was already Marxist. *El portero* is a product of this experience.

The protagonist of *El portero* is Juan, a doorman in a luxurious apartment building who is obsessed with telling everyone he meets about a door that allows access to "true happiness." At first Juan's preoccupation with a form of New-Age mysticism, a metaphysical door that leads into another dimension, is

⁵ Reinaldo Arenas, *Celestino antes del alba*, Caracas, Monte Ávila Editores, 1980.

⁶ Arenas, *El mundo alucinante*, Mexico City, Editorial Diógenes, 1969.

⁷ Arenas, *Otra vez el mar*, Barcelona, Editorial Argos Vergera, 1982.

⁸ Arenas, *Antes que anochezca*, Barcelona, Tusquets Editores, 1992; p. 30.

⁹ *Ibid.*; pp. 330-331.

not based on a consciousness of antagonistic class relations that could pose a threat to the privileged way of life of the tenants who live in the building where he works. Although he is a proletarian, he does not see himself as a member of an oppressed social class, and does not express any interest in the existence of this oppressed class as such. Juan belongs to the privileged strata of proletarians; he's unionized, he works full time under tolerable working conditions and earns a living wage. It's significant that as an immigrant who (like Arenas) left Cuba during the Mariel exodus (1980), Juan obtains his job by means of his connection to a network of economically and socially successful immigrants who left Cuba before 1980. In the United States, thanks to his benefactors, Juan never experiences prolonged unemployment or extreme hardship. He spends his working hours in pleasant surroundings. As far as his awareness of the underclass is concerned, it is nonexistent. In this sense, Juan has something in common with Reginald Denny, the truck driver who was beaten during the Los Angeles rebellion in 1992, two years after the publication of *El portero*. In a joint appearance on the Phil Donahue show with Henry Watson, one of the young men accused of beating him, Denny had the following to say: "I used to just drive there [South Central L.A.] with my windows rolled up. The people there didn't exist for me. On April 29 their existence came crashing through my window."¹⁰ Similarly, the animal characters of *El portero* form an underclass that exists literally under Juan's nose, but of whose existence as a class he is unaware. The second part of the novel tells the story of how these animals, most of whom are the tenant's pets, act together in a class-consciousness way to radically alter Juan's understanding of his relationship to society, and to transform this understanding into revolutionary practice.

Most critics who have studied *El portero* have concluded Arenas's novel does not represent a totalizing political or philosophical message. Francisco Soto, for example, considers that "En oposición a la fábula tradicional que ofrecía información práctica de cómo vivir, *El portero* no ofrece soluciones a los problemas que aquejan al hombre contemporáneo."¹¹ In the second part of *El portero* the animal characters participate in meetings that lead to the planning of a classless society that eliminates exploitation and represents a means of satisfying their individual and collective needs. Whether or not this kind of society offers a solution to the problems that plague contemporary man is above all a *political* question. Soto must find something objectionable about radical social transformation as a solution to man's problems, as he represses the political message of *El portero* by excluding from his essay any mention of the attempt to create an alternative society based on such transformation.

¹⁰ Quoted in "Los Angeles: Power of Rebellion Beats Back Govt. Railroad", *Revolutionary Worker*, 28 Nov (1993); p. 5.

¹¹ Francisco Soto, "El portero: una alucinante fábula moderna", *Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispánica*, 32-33 (fall 1990-spring 1991), 106-117; p. 113.

William Luis's essay on the narrative of Arenas, Luis Rafael Sánchez and Julia Álvarez includes a section on *El portero* and contains suggestive observations on the similarity between American capitalism and Cuban communism, the exploitative relationship between the tenants and Juan, and Juan's role as a liberator. But Luis doesn't go far enough with the class analysis. For example, he affirms that "La voz colectiva y anónima del narrador, que no es Arenas, se independiza de cualquier interpretación forzada que el lector quisiera hacer basada en una equivocada identificación de quién podría ser el narrador o el escritor."¹² This is correct, but it ignores the fact that the narrative voice identifies itself with the Cuban bourgeoisie throughout the novel: "somos ciudadanos prácticos, respetables, muchos enriquecidos, y miembros de la nación hoy por hoy más poderosa del mundo;"¹³ "muchos miembros de nuestra próspera comunidad han utilizado los servicios del señor Rozeman con tal éxito que algunos han llegado a ser presidentes de bancos internacionales..." (74). When the narrative voice announces at the end of the novel that "Nuestra única esperanza—nuestra gran arma—es nuestro portero," this is in the context of the right-wing Cuban exile community's struggle against "nuestro antagonista" (Castro), as the allies of this community ("los aliados" [The United States]) are not considered to be trustworthy (155). Castro was also regarded with high expectations by much of the Cuban bourgeoisie at the beginning of the revolution, in his case as one who would liberate them from the Batista dictatorship.

For Luis the liberation of the animals from man is problematical because it suggests that "el hombre mismo es corrupto por naturaleza y enemigo de la raza humana."¹⁴ This liberation becomes more understandable when it is considered that *El portero* is an allegory of proletarian revolution where humanity is for the most part represented by the upper-class residents of a luxurious apartment building, and is further identified with the bourgeoisie by means of the narrative voice. Thus Arenas's novel suggests that not man in general, but one social class in particular (the bourgeoisie), "is corrupt and the enemy of the human race."

The Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, as it has been applied by critics, such as Alma Camacho-Gingerich in her article on *El portero*, stresses synchronic over diachronic relationships: "Para Arenas, como para Bakhtin, la carnavalización implica lo paródico en la medida en que equivale a confrontación, interacción, choque y confusión es decir cuando equivale a *intertextualidad*:"

¹² William Luis, "El desplazamiento de los orígenes en la narrativa caribeña de Reinaldo Arenas, Luis Rafael Sánchez y Julia Álvarez", *La Torre: Revista General de la Universidad de Puerto Rico*, 2-3 (1997), 39-71; p. 56.

¹³ Arenas, *El portero*, Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1990; p. 12. All page references to this work will be given parenthetically after quotations.

¹⁴ Luis, *op. cit.*; p. 57.

la transposición de uno o varios sistemas de signos a otro."¹⁵ Confrontation, shock and confusion are terms that lend themselves to describing momentary, random collisions between sign systems. Interaction is more appropriate to describing the development of these systems over a period of time, but only in the vaguest sense of the word. However, the philosophical essence of *El portero* is (as will be demonstrated) a theory about the lawful development of signs: dialectical materialism. The traditional carnival (on which the concept of the carnivalesque is based) is too inclusive to be truly revolutionary: All social classes can participate on an equal basis. In the second part of Arenas's text the bourgeoisie is excluded from the new society. Carnival is a safety valve that allows society to let off steam. It serves a profoundly conservative purpose by forestalling the permanent transformation of society.

The narrative structure and content of the first part of *El portero* symbolize the triumph of the bourgeoisie in the age of the collapse of communism. We have come a long way since *El mundo alucinante* (1969). As opposed to a multiplicity of narrative voices that symbolize the conflict between the perspectives of different social classes, there is one that claims to represent the entire Cuban American community in the first person plural, but that identifies this community with the Cuban American bourgeoisie:

¿Qué querían ustedes? ¿Que le ofreciéramos [a Juan] nuestras piscinas? Que así, por su linda cara... le abriéramos las puertas de nuestras residencias en Coral Gables, que le entregáramos nuestro carro del año para que conquistase a nuestras hijas que con tanto esmero hemos educado, y que lo dejáramos, en fin, vivir la dulce vida sin antes conocer el precio que hay que pagar por cada bocanada de aire? Eso sí que no. (13)

The identification of Cuban Americans with a way of life and a set of values that may be characterized as bourgeois is inaccurate, as not all members of this community partake of these values, or belong to the middle or upper classes, in part one the role played by the lower class is marginalized by treating the bourgeoisie as representatives of humanity in general:

De ninguna manera [Juan] podía concebir que la existencia de toda aquella gente [the tenants] y por extensión la de todo el mundo, fuese sólo unir y venir de un cubículo a otro... de oficinas a dormitorios, de trenes a cafeterías, de subterráneos a ómnibus, y así incesantemente... (14)

The phrase "y por extensión la de todo el mundo" implies that for Juan the tenants represent everyone. In fact, the lives of hundreds of millions of people throughout the world, including those in the United States who are poor, have little in common with the privileged existence of most of these tenants. The

¹⁵ Alina Camacho-Gingerich, "El portero: El exilio como testigo o la realidad de la irrealidad", *Reinaldo Arenas: recuerdo y presencia*, Reinaldo Sánchez, ed., Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1994, 77-85; p. 82.

only tenants who belong to Juan's social class are the building's custodian and his family. Their chaotic existence in an apartment filled with an odd assortment of objects ("Flores plásticas, muñecas sin brazos, libros deshojados, huesos de aves ...") (67) and the custodian's lack of class-consciousness or solidarity with Juan (like the tenants he turns against him) symbolize, in terms of family life, the disorganized and depoliticized working class in the United States during the Reagan years.

El portero contains a denunciation of Cuban communism in the conversation between Casandra Levinson, a Columbia University professor, and Juan.¹⁶ He points out to her that the "worker's paradise" she considers Cuba to be is a repressive dictatorship and America is by contrast a "free" society (49). Casandra Levinson tries to convert Juan into a supporter of Castro, but he is not cooperative, due to the suffering he experienced in Cuba. In terms of what she says to Juan, Levinson gives the impression of being an orthodox communist and a resolute enemy of the bourgeoisie. But as the narrator makes clear, by means of providing pertinent biographical information about her salary, stock market investments, and social habits, she is bourgeois: "Ella iba a Cuba dos o tres veces al año. Se hospedaba gratuitamente en los mejores hoteles y además de recibir las orientaciones pertinentes, desataba una actividad sexual tan intensa que al regresar venía convertida en una dama respetabilísima, casta y moral que practicaba casi devotamente la abstinencia" (47). While she is in Cuba, the only use she has for Cubans, other than members of the ruling class is, it seems, as sexual objects. She obtains sex in exchange for material goods not easily acquired in Cuba. Juan can see through the veneer of revolutionary rhetoric to the hypocritical and exploitative essence of Levinson as he has encountered this type of personality before in Cuba:

Pero Casandra Levinson seguía hablando y su discurso le recordaba al portero las mismas palabras, la misma hipócrita retórica de los agentes del Ministerio del Interior, cuando ya asilado en la Embajada del Perú en La Habana, luego de haber tratado de rendirlo por hambre junto a diez mil ochocientas personas apelaban ahora a una serie de "principios sociales y morales" para que desistiese en sus intenciones de abandonar el país. (47)

Even though Juan evaluates Casandra Levinson perceptively, he does not realize how correct she is in her appraisal of his relationship to the tenants: "¿No se da usted cuenta... de lo miserable de su vida, abriéndole la puerta a gente que lo desprecia y lo considera inferior?" (48). Neither is he aware of how prescient she is when she affirms "la única ayuda que usted puede brindarle a la humanidad es incorporándose a la lucha de clases hasta lograr el triunfo de los obreros" (48). The formal significance of the contradiction

¹⁶ Casandra Levinson is based on the real-life character of Sandra Levinson, the Director of the Center for Cuban Studies in New York City.

created by this clash of opposing viewpoints will be better understood after a reading of the second part of the novel. For now it will be affirmed that like her mythological namesake, Casandra is a prophetess who is rebuked.

For Juan the tenants are, for the most part, a group of successful individuals. He does not see them, at first, as representatives of an oppressive social class. However, as the first part of *El portero* progresses, it becomes evident that Arenas criticizes American society within the Marxist tradition. The narrative voice, which claims to base its story on information received from other members of the Cuban American community and on Juan's writings (97), has an important role to play in this critique. Much of what it narrates, including the plot, information about the different characters in the novel and the most intimate details of Juan's emotional life, can be read as criticism of capitalism. As well as affirming it represents the bourgeoisie, the narrative voice itself subverts capitalism. This contradictory role puts into question who is narrating, a question that cannot really be answered. The use of the narrative voice for this subversive purpose does not affect its ideological affiliation in the rest of the novel, or its perception of the representation of that affiliation in the rest of the novel, or its perception of the representation of that affiliation as class identity, which, as noted during the discussion of Luis article, remains constant throughout. An implied message of *El portero* is that it will take more than narrating a communist fable to significantly alter the class nature of the Cuban American bourgeoisie.

The reader is introduced to a series of characters who in the course of their interaction with Juan exemplify different aspects of bourgeois society in a highly schematic manner. In terms of this analysis three of these characters are highly significant. The episodes with Roy Friedman and Nancy exemplify, respectively, capitalist relations of production and commodity circulation. The episode with Joseph Rozeman deals with commodity fetishism or consumption.

Roy Friedman is a tenant who tries to convince others that the source of happiness in life is based on the exchange of candy. The giving and receiving of candy is reminiscent of the custom of giving candy to disguised children who go from door to door on Halloween. It's customary for them to say "trick or treat" to the person who comes to the door, implying that those who give no candy will be subjected to a mischievous prank. Children demand to be bribed with candy as the price for leaving adults in peace. This works out to the advantage of the adults, as candy is relatively inexpensive. Another way of saying this is the adults are able to preserve their domination over children by means of an unequal exchange that does not significantly alter the status quo. Friedman's philosophy, which he expounds to Juan after inviting him to his apartment, raises the principle of the unequal exchange, whereby the price of social harmony is measured in candy, to the level of a categorical imperative. But in contrast to the situation prevailing in Halloween, those who *receive* the

candy (certainly not all of them children), have the greater burden of compulsion thrust upon them: "y sobre todo, ay, aquel que no acepta el caramelo está perdido" (17). This philosophy is an expression of the desire to maintain relations of domination, which in the final analysis are relations of bourgeois domination, for as inexpensive a price as possible for the class Friedman represents. In his system, exchange between equal subjects forms the end point of a continuum leading from the real conditions of existence to ideology: from bourgeois exploitation to abstract exchange. Once the existence of social classes is taken into account, the exchange between apparently equal subjects is revealed as an exploitative relationship in which the proletariat, who do not own the means of production, are compelled to exchange what they do own, their labor power, for, if not candy, then as low a wage as possible by the owners of the means of production.

The self-interest that is the unstated driving force behind Friedman's philosophy of life also affects social relations between those who buy or sell commodities in the capitalist market. These individuals need each other in order to carry out their transactions, but one sells for as much money as possible and the other tries to save as much as possible. They are thus wholly dependent on each other and fundamentally antagonistic or indifferent to each other's interests. For example: Juan goes shopping for Christmas presents in "Nancy's" (a parody of Macy's). He moves between a dazzling array of products and salespeople, ranging from elegantly attired women who spray him with 11 types of perfume to the owner of the store, Nancy, who straps a parachute on Juan allowing him to jump off a balcony. However, he must pay before he jumps:

Nancy, siempre extremadamente cortés, le alargó la factura del paracaídas para que la firmase, preguntándole si pagaría en *cash* o con tarjeta de crédito.

—Yo no sabía que tenía que comprarlo —dijo Juan señalando para el paracaídas.

—¡Cómo! —bramó Nancy, súbitamente transformada en una fiera —¿Así que quiere usted usar la mercancía y no pagarla? ¿Cree usted que yo estoy aquí para jugar? (81)

The freedom created by an overabundance of products, whether this is in terms of the opportunity to make a living by selling them or consumer choice, is undercut by the fundamental antagonism of human relations mediated by the commodity form. As Richard Lichtman has observed, "This antagonistic atomism masquerades in the guise of autonomy, self realization, and personal freedom."¹⁷ But the dialectical counterpart of this individualism is the mutual dependence that constitutes the deep structure of capitalist social reality. This dependence is a form of domination, as it is not under the collective control of society. The foundation of bourgeois individualism is social powerlessness. Real individuality differs from bourgeois individualism and is possible on the

¹⁷ Richard Lichtman, *The Production of Desire*, New York, The Free Press, 1982; p. 225.

basis of the social regulation of production according to the needs of the community and its members. By means of this regulation, individualism, founded as it is on social powerlessness, can be replaced by a system of "free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on the subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth."¹⁸ Only after the material basis for antagonistic social and class relations has been eliminated, only after the structure of reciprocal dependency produced by commodity exchange has been replaced by the individual autonomy made possible by socialized production, will the individual members of society subject their interrelatedness to their collective control.

Juan struggles to preserve his individuality, which is connected to his perception of himself as a redeemer who will transform society, in an environment inimical to the expression and development of this individuality. Most of the tenants relate to Juan as a means for the fulfillment of their needs: they have little or no interest in his needs. Joseph Rozeman sees Juan as a potential human advertisement for his dental practice: "después de todo," he tells Juan, "como portero me haría una excelente propaganda" (76). He tries to convince Juan to replace his teeth with a set of oversized false teeth that will create the impression he is always smiling. Rozeman wants to transform Juan into someone with a radiant smile who looks like a winner. In a highly competitive society there is a market driven by the need to appear successful, and Rozeman has made a living by catering to it. In an effort to maximize his share of this market, he guarantees his clients they will be successful if they look the part by using his product. His message is "image is everything." In a real sense it is everything for Rozeman, whose wealth has been accumulated by convincing enough people to spend thousands of dollars on custom-made dentures. From the perspective of the consumer, he promotes an obsession with personal appearance even as he subordinates the expression of individuality to a fetishistic relationship to a commodity. As he gazes at a life-size mannequin Rozeman has constructed that shows what he will look like with the dentures, Juan perceives this subordination as the obliteration of his personality, and he refuses to become Rozeman's client:

Y mientras Mr. Rozeman lo conminaba a que se sacase todos los dientes y se transformase en aquel maniquí triunfante, nuestro portero comprendió que de hacerlo, él, el verdadero portero, desaparecería para siempre y con él aquella insólita (para él extraordinaria) misión de la que se creía responsable.

Si quieres —ya Mr. Rozeman lo tuteaba— podemos ahora mismo comenzar a rebajarte los dientes naturales para instalar en tu rostro la sonrisa del triunfo.

Pero entonces, por primera vez en sus largos meses como portero, Juan declinó en voz alta las sugerencias de uno de sus señores.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Martin Nicolaus, trans., Baltimore, Penguin, 1958; p. 158.

Fue un simple monosílabo, pero dicho en un tono tan rotundo y desesperado que Mr. Rozeman comprendió que por primera vez en su larga vida profesional se le escapaba un cliente al que ya creía tener en sus manos. (76)

Juan's sense of individuality is inextricably connected with his need to communicate with others about his mission in life. Unlike Rozeman, he has a genuine concern for the other as an individual. He is determined to find a door that is "special and mysterious" for each of the tenants, a door that in some way corresponds to their individual needs (76), but he does not articulate what these needs or his own really are. His refusal to become Rozeman's client is the beginning of a process that will lead to his participation in a rebellion against the tenants.

As a result of his inability to find the door, and his inability to convey to the tenants the importance of this search, Juan's confidence in the efficacy of his redemptive powers is shaken. Having decided the reality he finds himself in is as intolerable as the one he left behind in Cuba ("Y si bien era cierto que no podía tolerar lo que había dejado ... también era cierto que no podía permanecer en la realidad que había encontrado" [90]), Juan contemplates doing away with himself. At this juncture the dog Cleopatra emerges from the elevator and begins talking with him. She invites him to a meeting the following night in the basement. At this meeting, all of the participants, except for Juan, are animals. Cleopatra is their undisputed leader. She is the last living representative of a breed of dogs that originated in ancient Egypt, and is described as being the most intelligent dog in the world. She enlightens Juan about the real nature of his relationship to the tenants: "Queremos hacerte comprender, entre otras cosas, que ninguna de las personas por las cuales tú tanto te preocupas te han entendido una palabra; es más, ni siquiera te han escuchado y hasta están ya planeando cómo echarte del edificio" (99). For the tenants, Juan is there to be used. When he does not conform to this role, and starts talking obscurely about a door and behaving strangely, he becomes an annoyance, and they try to have him fired. Cleopatra proposes to Juan that he join the animals, and together they will search for the door: "intentaremos buscar una solución, o como tú mismo has dicho, una salida o una puerta. Una puerta para ti y para nosotros. No para ellos los inquilinos, que no la necesitan, porque ni siquiera se han percatado de que están presos" (99). The tenants are "imprisoned" within a system that creates a divergence between their wants and their real needs. Their wants "are determined by aggressive drives [and] are directed towards the exploitation of others."¹⁹ In this process of aggression and exploitation the self loses its humanity and becomes machine-like. This tendency reaches an extreme in the case of Walter Skirius, a tenant who turns himself into a robot by replacing his body parts with mechanical replicas. The

¹⁹ Paul Baran, "Crisis of Marxism?", *Monthly Review*, 10.6 (1958), 224-234; p. 232.

mechanical self is an expression of the desire to resist the passage of time and of the fear of death in a system where the fulfillment of the desire to be fully alive must always be deferred. The relationship of Skirius's robotic personality to death is highlighted by his fiery demise in the presence of Juan. Being alive in the fullest sense of the word implies the recognition and development of the subject's individuality. This development is dialectically related to the collective fulfillment of basic human needs. If the tenants are unaware that they are, in Cleopatra's word, "imprisoned", this can be attributed to the effect of ideology. As Paul Baran has observed:

While it used to be thought that bourgeois ideology would guard the existing social order from man's efforts to satisfy basic human needs—decent livelihood, knowledge, solidarity and cooperation with fellowmen, gratification in work and freedom from toil—the actual *wants* of men in the societies of advanced capitalism are determined by aggressive drives, are directed toward the attainment of individual privileges and the exploitation of others, towards frivolous consumption and barren entertainment. With bourgeois taboos and moral injunctions *internalized*, people steeped in the culture of monopoly capitalism do not want what they need and do not need what they want.²⁰

There is a passage in *El portero* reminiscent of the passage I have quoted above. It occurs during an assembly of the animals, just before they begin their escape from the tenants:

—El caso es —dijo Cleopatra cortando la discusión— que ahora todos sabemos lo que primero que nada queremos. Aunque luego tengamos diferentes ideas o preferencias, lo que ahora deseamos es marcharnos pues nada podremos obtener junto al hombre quien, además de utilizarnos, desconoce lo que quiere o quiere lo que desconoce. Ahí esta la gran diferencia entre él y nosotros ... Ellos tienen a Bach, por ejemplo, pero al momento ya desean oír otra cosa y se pasan la vida saltando de ruido en ruido sin oír ya música alguna. Es un ejemplo, claro. A ustedes puede o no gustarles Bach, pero estoy seguro de que tienen sus gustos y esos gustos no cambian constantemente. Sin embargo, ¿quién de entre los más sabios de los hombres conoce exactamente lo que quiere o una vez cumplido su deseo se queda conforme? (146)

Within the confines of bourgeois ideology, man's fetishistic relationship to the commodity form keeps him jumping from "noise to noise" without really hearing any music. The substitution of one commodity for another never produces self-liberation, as the social relations the subject must enter into in order to acquire commodities represent the negation of individuality by means of the structures of capitalist domination, in order to escape from this domination, the animals must escape from man. The animals' decision to abandon man represents a rejection of Juan's metaphysical orientation in favor of a materialistic analysis of the concrete reality of their relationship to the human race. As the

²⁰ *Op. cit.*; pp. 232-233.

squirrel puts it, "no es de teología de lo que aquí tratamos, sino de una solución práctica a nuestra vida material" (117).

The anticommunist sentiments expressed by the narrator and Juan during his interview with Casandra Levinson in the first part of *El portero* form one aspect of a contradiction. A second one is formed by Cassandra Levinson's evaluation of Juan's relationship to the tenants. Part one of the novel represents the second part of this contradiction becoming the dominant aspect of the contradiction by means of a Marxist critique of capitalism. Part two represents the resolution of this contradiction. At this point it would be useful to summarize some of the basic concepts of dialectical materialism. As Mao has observed, "The law of contradiction in things, that is, the law of the unity of opposites, is the basic law of materialist dialectics."²¹ Dialectical materialism maintains that in order to understand how a thing develops it should be studied "internally and in its relationship with other things":²² "the fundamental cause of the development of a thing is not external but internal; it lies in the contradictoriness within the thing. There is internal contradiction in every single thing, hence its motion and development."²³ Mental processes are also examples of contradiction: "Every difference in men's concepts should be regarded as reflecting an objective contradiction. Objective contradictions are reflected in subjective thinking, and this process constitutes the contradictory movement of concepts, pushes forward the development of thought, and ceaselessly solves problems in men's thinking."²⁴ The different aspects of a contradiction are in a relation of mutual dependency. Each aspect presupposes the existence of the other: "Without life, there would be no death; without death, there would be no life. Without "up" there would be no "down"... Without the bourgeoisie there would be no proletariat; without the proletariat, there would be no bourgeoisie."²⁵ The unity formed by the opposites that form a contradiction is subject to change: The struggle between these opposites is incessant.

As well as providing a means for understanding the form of *El portero*, a dialectical materialist approach is useful for an interpretation of the philosophical content of each of the animal's monologues in the second part of *El portero*. Each of the animals has a recognizably human personality that has some relationship to what kind of animal it is, or to its owner. The self projected by most of these animals is for all its variety, static, in the sense that it represents an essential identity that differentiates it from the other animals and is not subject to change. The monkey, who affirms that the essence of being is change,

²¹ Mao Tse-tung, "On contradiction", *Five Essays on Philosophy*, Peking, Foreign Language Press, 1977, 23-78; p. 23.

²² *Ibid.*; p. 26.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

contradicts this conception of self. The appearance of permanence is comparable to a mask and characteristic of humans:

Sólo somos auténticos si cambiamos incesantemente. ¡Caminemos en cuatro patas y en una, en dos y en ninguna! ¡Corramos! ¡Saltemos! ¡Volemos! ¡Arrastrémonos! Nuestra verdadera identidad es un disfraz incesante, una broma infinita. Lo solemne es la tumba. Desconfiemos de las caras serias, tienen puesta una máscara que por usarla durante tanto tiempo se les ha pegado al rostro. He ahí otra diferencia entre el hombre y nosotros. Nosotros no tenemos máscara, somos. (132)

By imitating man, the animals lose this purity of being. Liberty is to be found in a communal relationship that takes place outside of the framework of human (bourgeois) domination. In this relationship, freedom is based on the self's recognition of its interconnection with others as part of a material reality that is in a constant process of change:

Porque, ¿qué es la libertad sino la posibilidad de jugar, burlándonos hasta de nosotros mismos y a la vez tratando de aprender un poco más de los otros al parodiarlos? Y así tiene que ser, puesto que nadie es en sí mismo algo exacto, sino un remedo de las otras cosas. ¿No tiene la serpiente ojos de cotorra? ¿No tiene la cotorra lengua de mujer? ¿Y no tiene la mujer el olor del pez y las uñas de la gata? ... ¿Y no quiere el hombre volar como la paloma, navegar como el pato y cavar túneles como el conejo? Vemos así que la única manera de ser es ser un poco cualquier ser o ser cualquier cosa, para ser más preciso. Sólo somos auténticos si cambiamos incesantemente. (131-132)

A living being is simultaneously identical with itself and non-identical, as it refers to some other animate entity or thing. In Arenas's text this process is not static and symbolizes the transformation of the subject according to the law of contradiction in objects, as the contradiction formed by the identical and non-identical aspects of the subject yields to a new unity with its constituent opposition: "¿No tiene la serpiente ojos de cotorra? ¿No tiene la cotorra lengua de mujer? ¿Y no tiene la mujer el olor del pez y las uñas de la gata?" In other words, the serpent becomes the parrot that becomes the woman. According to dialectical materialism "in the process of development of each thing a movement of opposites exists from beginning to end."²⁶ This process can occur quickly, or over an extended period of time, and can involve more than one contradiction:

The nature of a thing is determined mainly by the principal aspect of a contradiction, the aspect which has gained the dominant position.

But this situation is not static: the principal and the non-principal aspects of a contradiction transform themselves into each other and the nature of a thing changes accordingly. In a given process or at a given stage in the development of a

²⁶ Mao, *op. cit.*; p. 30.

contradiction, A is the principal aspect and B is the non-principal aspect; at another stage or in another process the roles are reversed—a change determined by the extent of the increase or decrease in the force of each aspect in its struggle against the other in the course of the development of a thing.²⁷

In the course of this development the different aspects of a contradiction interpenetrate each other and produce something qualitatively different than A or B. For example, in the imaginary contradiction between “la serpiente” and “ojos de cotorra,” as the second of these becomes the principal aspect of the contradiction, the result is not only a pair of eyes, but also a parrot.

For the monkey, liberty takes the form of being able to be anyone or anything. Individuality becomes a matter of the subject taking the place of signs that are free to refer to, and interact with any other signs in the field of possible relations (society). For the animals as a class this freedom is only possible within the context of the elimination of human domination. That is to say, on the basis of a struggle to eliminate exploitative social relations based on antagonistic class relations. Thus, the resolution of the contradiction between permanence and change in individuality posed by the animals and the monkey is resolved by systematizing the permanence of change by means of revolutionary transformation.

Under bourgeois domination, the contradictions that impel the development of the social order are riddled with antagonism. Among these are the following: the contradiction between the proletariat's fetishistic relationship to the commodity form it produces and the desire to transform this relationship into one where man and nature become the greatest source of value in life, the contradiction between man's nature as an intelligent pleasure-seeking being and the conception of the human body as private property not for public consumption, and the contradiction between the desire for sexual freedom and the repression of sexuality from early childhood onwards. The subject's loss of control of her body sets the stage for the latter loss of control of her work, of her community, and of her relationship to man.

In the society envisioned by the monkey, there is no place for the antagonistic contradictions produced by class domination, thus there is no place for the bourgeoisie. In this sense the animals will not be free to do as they please. They can parody human beings and make fun of them, but they will not permit themselves to form a social class that exploits a subordinate group of animals. Such a rigid social hierarchy would be against the rules of the “game”:

Pues ellos [humans] se creen la medida de todas las cosas, y así, descabelladamente, lo proclaman. Pero nosotros sabemos que cada cosa tiene su medida y que esa medida es además elástica y cambiante... La actitud de la mosca, a mi parecer concuerda conmigo en cuanto a lo de saltar y gozar, pero hay en ella como un sentimiento de

²⁷ *Ibid.*; p. 54.

culpa, de sacrificio (sin duda copiado del hombre al que siempre ha rondado) que yo no reconozco. No hay por qué pagar con una pronta muerte un efímero goce. Todo al contrario, el goce se ha de prolongar espantando la muerte. Interpretemos la realidad profundamente, es decir, tal como es. Seamos pues versátiles y burlescos, irreverentes y joviales. En ese sentido el portero es mi mejor aliado. Él se manifiesta de un modo diferente con cada inquilino; es lo que el inquilino quiere que él sea, pero a la vez quiere que los inquilinos sean lo que él desearía que fuesen y siempre se está debatiendo entre actitudes contradictorias... El juego es, en fin, la única medida de todas las cosas. Y si nos alejáramos del hombre no debería ser para odiarlo sino para podernos burlar de él cómodamente. (132-33)

After finishing his speech, the monkey parodies different types of humans and animals. The animals respond enthusiastically and some of them try to imitate him. Their response is an indication that they are receptive to what he has said, which is significant, as it implies that the community formed by them will be more than a collection of isolated individuals who attend to their needs without paying much attention to each other. In this community individual differences will be recognized and individual needs fulfilled on the basis of equality among its members:

Así que como nosotros sabemos lo que queremos, lo que tenemos que hacer es conseguirlo. Cada uno de ustedes, además del gran deseo de huir, aspira a algo distinto o por lo menos no exactamente igual a lo que el otro quiere. ¿Es imposible, entonces, encontrar un lugar donde poder vivir en relativa armonía? No lo creo. (147)

Cleopatra goes on to describe a journey to the Pacific coast that proceeds southwards and ends at the base of a mountain. There the animals will find a home that fulfills their needs: "En su base, debajo del mar, vivirán los peces, entre los árboles estará tranquila la paloma torcaza con los demás pájaros.... en la cúspide, habrá nieve y el oso podrá construir su residencia" (147). According to William Luis, his mountain is reminiscent of the Sierra Maestra, that sheltered the rebel army in the first stages of the Cuban Revolution "La montaña es una representación simbólica de lo que significaba la Revolución en 1959 y la inocencia y optimismo del mismo Arenas."²⁸ For the animals the mountain is a means of production that will allow them to reproduce themselves, develop their individuality and lead lives free from exploitation. It represents a material basis that makes possible the collective control by individual members of society of their interrelatedness by means of the elimination of the commodity form and the antagonistic social and class relations of capitalism.

Whenever necessary, the animals work together in a spirit of voluntary cooperation. An example of this occurs during the journey to their future dwelling place:

²⁸ Luis, *op. cit.*; p. 58.

Tanto las palomas torcazas como las domésticas, agrupándose por centenares, trasladaban por los aires a las lagartijas y a la serpiente; a las cotorras, a las que ya se les habían unido numerosos familiares, aprisionaban con sus patas a la pecera y a las jicoteas que se veían sobrevolar las más altas montañas. (148)

After reaching the Pacific coast, Cleopatra announces to the animals that she will retire from the group, as she is afraid of attracting the attention of search parties because of her great worth. Her departure leaves the animals without an effective government, as she is their leader. Here, and with the themes of the proliferation of individual differences in the new society and voluntary cooperation, one can detect the influence of anarchist doctrines, the principal feature of which is the belief that government is both harmful and unnecessary. Nevertheless in the period of time leading up to her departure, Cleopatra's leadership is instrumental in converting the tenants' animals into a disciplined revolutionary organization. The animals demonstrate their ability to carry out complex and well-coordinated operations when they rescue Juan from the insane asylum to which he had been committed after it was discovered that he was talking to them. Juan's imprisonment is the immediate motive for their departure, as they are all afraid they will be treated in a similar manner. As they journey to their new homeland, vast numbers of other animals join the animals, and their revolt is transformed into a revolution.

Before she departs, Cleopatra advises Juan to familiarize himself with the language of material objects; "el idioma de los árboles, el de las piedras y hasta el de las cosas; algo muy importante, pues algún día servirás de intérprete entre ellos y el hombre" (150). She concludes by predicting that one day material objects will become completely independent and attack man, or cause his death: "Será la revolución total. Las piedras saltarán y romperán las cabezas de los transidentes....¿Quién podrá evitar... la voluntaria separación de las piezas de un avión en pleno vuelo...?" (151). This is reminiscent of the conclusion of another utopian text: Alejo Carpentier's *Viaje a la semilla* (1944), where material objects recover their independence and return to an undifferentiated state as prelude to the possible rebirth of a transformed world.²⁹ The relationship to an earlier modernist text is consistent with the rejection of postmodernist culture and the presence of themes characteristic of modernism in *El portero*—class—consciousness, the dialectic, and utopia.

By teaching man the language of material objects, Juan will be teaching mankind to understand itself, as it is an aspect of material reality. Total revolution is equivalent to the elimination of all forms of domination that limit and repress the development of the material world, including man, in a process of ceaseless contradiction. These forms of domination include all types of social

²⁹ Alejo Carpentier, "Viaje a la semilla", *Cuentos completos*, 5th ed., Barcelona, Editorial Bruguera, 1983, 65-93.

relations that convert man into a form of property, such as marriage and parent-child relationships as they are presently conceived, or all relations of production where man must submit to exploitation in order to purchase his existence. All members of the new society would be free to realize their nature as matter in motion; that is to say, free to combine, separate and arrange themselves in any way they please within the limits of classless nonantagonistic social relationships.

At the conclusion of the novel, Juan narrates a description of the doors that will allow the animals to enter utopia: "Al final habría una puerta por donde la paloma torcaza, al trasponerla, encontraría su paisaje añorado.... Puerta de tierra y agua, vasta y silenciosa tendrá la jicotea... Y por esas puertas, todos, finalmente, desaparecerían presurosos. Todos menos yo, el portero, que desde afuera los veré alejarse definitivamente" (156). He informs the reader that, like Cleopatra, he will not join the animals in the new society. Rather than see this as an indication of the impossibility of finding a solution to their existential crisis,³⁰ the self-denial of entry into the Marxist promised land can be read in a more concretely autobiographical sense, if Juan and Cleopatra are seen as doubles of the author, as a premonition of death and as a metaphor of what Arenas denied to himself, particularly in the United States; public acknowledgment of his attraction to Marxism.

The final part of *El portero* resolves the contradiction between the denunciation of Cuban communism and the Marxist critique of capitalism that is found in the first part of the novel by transforming the original denunciation into an assault on all forms of social organization that alienate man from the role of a pleasure-seeking being within the limits of non-antagonistic social relationships. A denunciation turning into its subversion: this seems to be the overturning of a hierarchy, but deconstruction is not the operative theoretical paradigm in this reading. The contradictions in Arenas's text have not been related to an essentialist theory about the "actual nature of literary language or of language as such" based on the dispersal of meaning of the signifier.³¹ In this reading Arenas's text does not fall apart, and all of its parts relate to each other as components of a totality grounded in history, as it takes into account what is emerging outside the text: proletarian revolution in the third world. The message of *El portero* is that proletarian revolution is the main tendency in the world today, as the revolution represented in *El portero* is worldwide in scope. On an aesthetic level this novel transforms the decentered, non-referential text of the dominant postmodernist style into a parable of the development of revolutionary consciousness as bracing as a chorus of political prisoners singing

³⁰ Perla Rozencvaig, "El portero de Reinaldo Arenas: las puertas multidimensionales del exilio," *Reinaldo Arenas: recuerdos y presencia*, Reinaldo Sánchez, ed., Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1994, 161-67; p. 167.

³¹ J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure", *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976), 5-33 (part I) and 330-48 (part II); p. 338.

from the depths of a Peruvian dungeon. Reference to the revolution taking place in Peru foregrounds a contradiction, not resolved in *El portero*, between the nonviolent revolution represented in the text and the violence, at times overt, and at other times barely contained, of the animals in their behavior with each other and with humans. Cleopatra, who admires Bach and attends live performances of organ music, is a demanding critic, who kills those performers who are not up to her exacting standards (53). She predicts that in the future, material objects will attack man and create total revolution (151). Whenever Cleopatra's comrades get out of line, she subdues them with the threat of violence. Brenda Hill's Cat attacks Juan and Roy Friedman's dog (115). Finally, as the narrator makes clear, during the migration of the world's animals to their new home, some of them eat each other: "Era impresionante observar desde lejos aquella marcha que aumentaba constantemente, aunque a veces (¡No podía ser de otro modo!) algunos animales se comían a los otros" (153). In literature, it's possible for the proletariat to escape from the bourgeoisie non-violently. In real life the seizure of state power by one social class subordinate to another has always been accomplished by violent means. Within the text the absence of revolutionary violence directed against the exploiting class by the animals draws attention to itself as a selective nonviolence contradicted by other forms of violence. The resolution of this contradiction, inevitably suggested by language ("¡No podía ser de otro modo!"), and dialectical materialist form, but projected *outside* of the text as allegory, is the violent, real, overthrow of the bourgeois state by the proletariat.

If communism is established throughout the world and the revolutionary transformation of reality proceeds unabatedly, it's possible those who live in that time will see the present day bourgeoisie in the same way as Cleopatra sees the tenants of her building, as prisoners who feel no need to escape from prison, as they are not aware of the reality of their imprisonment. Arenas's texts elucidate the structure and method of operation of this prison in which we (proletariat and bourgeoisie) are all inmates. In this way they contribute to the fulfillment of a vital need. In order to want to break out of prison we must first become aware we are imprisoned. In *El portero* diffusion of this awareness among the animals and the discrediting of bourgeois ideology are complementary processes that occur before the revolution. If enough people stop believing in the validity of the capitalist system and act on the basis of their beliefs in a revolutionary way, the text is saying, the days of the system are numbered.

Adolfo Cacheiro
Colegio del Estado de Wayne
Nebraska