

AUTHENTICITY and OPPRESSION: THE MOTHER-STATE TRANSFORMATION IN REINALDO ARENAS' SUBVERSIVE DISCOURSE

by Lillian Bertot Ph.D.

“Woe to him who does not walk the path where his mother no longer follows him, woe.”

José Lezama Lima (1)

In Reinaldo Arenas' work, the archetype of the mother appears as a complex of images whose radiations are associated with the numinous quality of the Terrible Mother and as such they manifest themselves in association with an authoritative state, both oppressive and criminal. Although the symbol of the mother is always ambivalent, the substitution of the Good Mother, and even of the Terrible Father by the Terrible Mother, in Arenas' texts represent a subversion of the social-mythical schemes in Cuban theology.

According to C. G. Jung: “Just as with any archetype, the archetype of the mother appears in an almost infinite variety of aspects. [...] The first in importance is the personal mother and the grandmother, the stepmother, the mother-in-law; then any woman with which there has ever existed a relationship—for example—an instructor or teacher or maybe a remote ancestor”(2).

The Junguian concepts of “archetype” and of “complex” applied in this case to literature and to text analysis offer a theoretical model for this essay as a starting point in facilitating the approximation to the representations or images of the mother in Arenas' work.

For C. G. Jung, “the archetype is an empty form, a formality; it is no more than a *facultas praeformandi*, a possibility of representation assigned a priori. The representations are not inherited, only the forms, and in that respect they are akin to the instincts, which are only determined in form [...] in the beginning they could be named and have an invariable nucleus of meaning—but always only in principle, never regarding a concrete manifestation”(3). The analyst and psychologist, June Singer, upon articulating the application of Carl G. Jung's “theory of complexes” to her psychological analysis offers a definition of what Jung identified as a “complex” which will be used as the basis for identifying the images of the mother in Arenas' work.

According to Singer: What Jung identified as “complexes” are certain constellations of psychic elements (ideas, opinions, convictions, etc.) that assemble around emotionally sensitive areas. [...] The complexes are comprised of two factors. The first is a nucleus-like element that acts as a magnet, and the second is a grouping of associations that adhere to the nucleus. The nucleus appears in turn to include two components. One is determined by experience and is causally related to the surrounding environment,

The other determines the disposition of the individual in question, and is innate: its foundation is basic to the structure of the psyche. When at any moment in life, the individual's disposition confronts a situation or experience, which cannot be fought off, a psychic trauma is produced [...] It is not the superficial blows and shakeups that lead to the formation of complexes. They are only those wounds that upon opening reveal the vital and formative elements of the psyche, the elements that Jung has called the archetypes. Those experiences that threaten our deepest beliefs—in our gods and in ourselves—those are the ones that cause the complexes. (4)

The images of the mother that appear in Arenas' texts are closely bound to the symbolic dichotomy of his work: freedom/oppression. The negative aspects of the mother in Arenas' texts (rejection, privation, dispossession, dissolution, transformation, psychic split, madness) (5), in relation to the son are drawn to the nucleus of that tension (to be/not to be, action/inaction, hero/ martyr, freedom/imprisonment, transformation/ inertia) to form a complex of images of a negative sign that the tradition associates with the images of the Terrible Mother and can be seen as the magnetic nucleus of the mother complex in the first novel of his “pentagon”, [*Celestino Before Dawn*] when the mother discovers the narrator, Celestino, writing:

My mother had just left the house running. And like a madwoman she came out screaming that she would throw herself in the well. I see my mother at the bottom of the well. [...] I arrive running and lean over. But, as always: I am the only one there at the bottom. My own image reflecting up from below [...] Mother of mine, this is not the first time that you deceive me: everyday you say that you are you going to dive head first in the well, and nothing. You never do it [...] We cried behind the old daisy clumps. My mother and I, we cried. [...] This house has always been a hell. And grandmother was the first one making crosses in all the corners. But when things got really bad was when Celestino started writing poetry. Poor Celestino! I see him now: seated on the living room step pulling his arms out. [...] Poor Celestino! Writing, writing incessantly, even on the back of the notebooks where grandfather writes down the dates when the cows get sired. On the leaves of the maguey tree and even on the back of the palm fronds [...] “That is what faggots do” my mother said when she found out about Celestino's writing everywhere. And that was the first time she threw herself in the well. “Before having such a son, I prefer death.” And the water level rose in the well. (6)

Rejection, psychic split, violence, murder, and death are the images associated with the mother in Arenas' works. Arenas' protagonists' deepest aspirations, their defining core of integration: writing and sexuality, their realization as a person, their authenticity, are in fact the areas of conflict with the mother (and with the grandfather, the grandmother, the aunts, society, the state) that come up time and time again in his works. Again and again the narrator, Celestino, would attempt although unsuccessfully to get close to his mother. He wants her to be understanding,

compassionate, inspiring, sublime, with the capacity to elevate him to spiritual development, all symbols associated with the Good Mother (7), but his desire is never fulfilled: "Again the lightening returned. My mother ran across the snow and embraced me tightly. And she said to me "son." And she called me "son." I smiled at my mother, and then, in a jump, I hugged her by the neck. And the two of us began to dance on the ground all covered in white. [...] Mom lifted me up very high. The highest her arms could. [...] Then I let go of my mother's arms and ran toward where my cousins were, and there all began to jump on the snow and to sing and to sing and to sing, as we became transparent, as transparent as the floor where our jumps did not remain scabbled. [...] For a moment we heard strong lightning. I saw a thunderbolt melt the snow in less than a second. And before giving out a scream and closing my eyes, I saw myself walking on the mud puddles and I saw Celestino writing poetry on the hard crust of the sugar apple trunks. My grandfather came out of the kitchen with an axe and began to knock down all the trees where Celestino had written even a single word."(8)

The images of the mother in Arenas' works appear very different from the images of for example, José Lezama Lima, forerunner and teacher of, among others, Arenas' generation. Reinaldo Arenas (1943-1992) has been the most prolific of the writers of the Mariel generation. The Mariel generation is not a generation determined by chronology. It is a generation that is defined as such because of having been a generation marked by the totalitarian experience, the harassment of a police state, exile, and the ontological psychic and social transformations that such experiments produce.

According to Alberto Baeza Flores: The Mariel—marielism—is a double rupture—literary and moral—from this generation who has lived through the parallel worlds of Orwell's *84* and Kafka's *The Castle* in their breathing of every day. Reinaldo Arenas, [...] and the others of *marielismo* establish new literary parameters from today's time and historical space. (9) Lezama's feminine, picks up on Martí's irradiations with regard to the mother, associated with the archetype of the Good Mother, and rooted as Lezama Lima would say, in the eras of Mary, fundamentally associated with the image of the mother of radiant divinity at whose face the son is prostrate in filial self-denial. Remember that Lezama dedicates all of his poetry to his mother. The first verse of his literary creation begins with the association of his poetry with the warp, with the traditional feminine activity of the weave. The spill over of the images of Penelope and Mathilde with their attributes of patient and loyal wives and the images emanating from the Greek myth of Danae, who conceived Perseus impregnated by the divine light, a transformation of Zeus, raindrops of light, remain in turn intertwined with the images and attributes of Mary in his Sonnets to the Virgin "God giver, gods' giver of birth. Soft." The images of the mother in Arenas were constructed along the same lines as the treatment of the mother/state in the book *Night of the Assassins*, written by the Cuban playwright, José Triana.

In Arenas' work the literary creation converges with his personal testimony and denunciation of the totalitarian state. It would be necessary to point out that the testimony of Arenas with regard to his biographical and biological mother confirms or better defines how the representations of the mother are portrayed in his fiction: "I always thought that, in my case, the best thing was to live far from my mother, to not make her suffer; perhaps all sons should abandon their mothers and live their own life. Certainly, they are two egos in conflict: that of the mother who wants us to be according to her desires and our own desire to realize our own aspirations. My whole life was a constant escape from my mother; from the country to Holguín, from Holguín to Havana; then wanting to flee from Havana to go abroad. I did not want to see the disappointment in my mother's face over the way I was living my life; her advice although practical and elementary was wise, but I could not turn into my mother or become her; I mean, an unfortunate man resigned to his frustration and devoid of a rebellious instinct, and above all, I would have to drown my most fundamental desires. (11).

The transformation of the Terrible Mother/State in Arenas' work constitutes a reevaluation or substitution of the Hispanic archetype of Terrible Father/State. That substitution aims in the specific case of the existential and conceptual frame of the characters of Arenas, toward the absence of the father. It is this absence of the father the other center towards which the work of Arenas gravitates, and the image that it replaces in reminiscing is not substituted by the memory of the Good Father as in the work of Lezama Lima. The absence is replaced by the opposing image beauty/ ugliness: the reminiscent degradation of the memory of the father marked by the offense to the mother and the abandonment of the mother and of the son, and supplanted ultimately, by the Terrible Mother, victim in turn of a father and of a terrible mother, a victimizer, and implacable tyrant whose death the son not only wants, but rather aims to propitiate.

Substitution or not of that image, inversion of the text, irreverence, subversion, in the work of Arenas the mother signifies the encounter with the female gargoyle, with the arcane, with the symbol of his destiny. Its manifestations and transformations: the castrating and oppressive mother of Celestino, the mother/ absence of Fortunato, the homicidal Old Rose, or Arthur's mother/ Revolution, the mother/ moon of Héctor and the mother/ totalitarian state of *The assault*, are all personifications and allegories of evil. The mother in the texts of Arenas is not only synonymous with the degradation and bestializing of the son, but rather she is the embodiment of his destruction, and as such, she is his enemy.

It would be necessary to note by way of parenthesis that the subhuman beasts of *The assault* in relation to the animal-like condition of his characters in Arenas' bestiary, includes the superhuman and fabulous animals of *The porter* are degraded in *The assault*. And the prey the beast is searching in retaliation for its subhuman condition as one last act rebellion, the character that is the most degraded

and heroic of all Arenas' protagonist, is his the mother. "I am looking for my mother" reverberates throughout the whole work, by way of colophon and sentence of blame, because the mother in *The Assault* is synonymous with all the miseries, penuries, toils, filth and indignities to which a human being could be subjected. It is important to note that in the contemporary Cuban literary tradition the transformations of mother or father/ oppressive state and still the homicidal parricide of both parents in relation to oppression and to the state had been elaborated by José Triana in his theater piece: *The night of the assassins*. The consequent bestializing of the characters in a totalitarian state as in Arenas' *The Assault*, and the vengeance and violence in relation to the surrounding environment, the state for example, suffocating, degrading and oppressive that by way of *leit motif* is interwoven in Arenas' novel of Arenas, would already have been profiled as much in Triana's work and in playwright Virgilio Piñera's piece: *The two old panics*.

However, the elaboration of the mother-state transformation in the work of Arenas proceeds systematically. The chronology and intertextuality of the mothers in Arenas, their reiteration, and their close relationship with the development or rather to the encysting of the sons' characters, the protagonists that were Celestino, Fortunato, Hector, Arthur, or the anonymous, amorphous, but conscious beast of *The assault*, constitute a true complex of antagonistic images that sustain, if not define, the symbolic tension freedom/oppression in the texts of Arenas. The son looks for his authenticity and legitimate realization, and the mother impedes it, hinders it, and she condemns him to failure and destruction. The alienation as a result of that usurpation of conscience as much by the mother, as by the state, or by the society in general is resisted by the protagonists and most other characters, Arenas' battered heroes.

The rebelliousness in the characters of Arenas contrasts, for example, with the attitudes of the characters in Heberto Padilla's novel: *In My Garden the Heroes Go to Pasture*. Victims of alienation, Padilla's characters appear as citizens ravished in a socialist garden (hell) where the ubiquitous character is the Terrible Father. These characters are true anti-heroes, demented men-reports, without discernment who have capitulated and who have transferred their self-government to others: The old guard considered the man, his contradictions and human conflicts. Raimundo simply went to the report. All men were just that, a report, with all its general margins of imprecision, but the conjectures and the conclusions belonged to the Apparatus and to the Party. (12)

In relation to the state the conjugation of associative metaphors to the Terrible Mother (or to the Terrible Father; male gargole that devours his children) form a total comparison to their continuation that it is tyrannical power. The control and authority which are exercised upon the sons and daughters by the main characters: the Terrible Mother: mother/ grandmother, The Terrible Father: the grandfather (straps, binding, traps, deceit, immobilization, degradation, put-downs, the devouring and destructing aspect that leads to death and extinction)(13) the transformation mother/

state is complete in Arenas' novel *Arthur, the brightest star* while the main character Arthur was prisoner in one of the forced-labor camps for homosexuals that the government had created in Cuba:

[...] Arthur was seen running toward a troop of soldiers who, holding weapons raised to their chest also advanced toward him; for a moment he was paralyzed, the notes of the great hymn still in his memory, [...] when he attentively watched the armed entourage he discovered with indisputable clarity that in command was not one of the many lieutenants of the regiment, all were equal - submissive with the bosses and arrogant toward the prisoners—but his mother. The Old Rosa, infuriated and dressed in military uniform, with shotgun in hand, charge yelling at him faggot, now you will not escape[...]. (14)

However, the mother/ totalitarian state in *The Assault* represents her most virulent transformation. In *The assault* the archetype of the Terrible Mother/ Terrible Father is of ambivalent sign like the Old Rode in *Arthur*. The force and tension that the complex of images of the Terrible Mother represents reaches its paroxysm, and the son reaches his orgiastic and brutal liberation through matricide; the moment that in Arenas' work represents the breakup of the totalitarian state: infuriated, amid the clarity, while the human slate spins the passwords out of control, GLORY TO THE VERY, VERY FIRST ONE, LONG LIVE THE VERY, VERY FIRST ONE, I arrive at the very first platform, that is as elevated and immense as a plateau from where one can see the infinite movement of all the vermin. There, in the front part of the platform is he, the big-bellied, hairy, gigantic figure, with his back to me, like a turtle in its shell, ecstatic before his sea of slaves. [...] But standing, erect and furious, I raise my eyes toward her snout. And I then see her, I see her, I see her, her. It is she, that face in front of me is the hated and awful face of my mother. And it is also the face of the Very, very first one. The two are the same person. No wonder it had been so hard for me to find her [...] Then, at the same instant, I exhausted and she moaning out her final howl, an unusual thundering noise travels through the crowd. It is an enormous whisper, emitted by the crowd that begins to destroy everything, murdering however many agents it could capture. So, suddenly, that mass entire dauntless mass began throwing hook punches, the tribunes are flattened, the watchtowers, and the railings, they make way with the flagpoles, knocking down multi-family dwellings, parks, loudspeakers and traveling prison cells. [...] And tired; making way through the roar without anybody noticing me (so delighted are they screaming finally we put an end to the Very, very first murderer; finally the beast fell) I can travel to the other end of the city. I walk until I reach the sand. (15)

The concentric and closed progression of the images of the Terrible Mother in the work of Arenas, the transformation of the Terrible Mother into a tyrant, a totalitarian state, the fight of the individual for his/her authenticity and realization amid the most wretched oppression, ultimately and almost by design, or prophecy forms a complex of associations, not only in the individual characters of Arenas, but

also in what C. G. Jung called, the collective unconscious. The collective, “the mass that remained dauntless” becomes copartner of the tremendous matricide/tyrannicide of a MOTHER/ STATE that has at its core, among others, the most perverse of the political bad habits: that of robbing the freedom of a people.

NOTES

- 1 José Lezama Lima, “Llamado del deseoso”, *Aventuras sigilosas en Obras completas*, vol. 1 (México: M. Aguilar Editor, S. A. , 1975), p. 759.
- 2 C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 81.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 4 June Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul: the Practice of Jung's Psychology* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 37-38.
- 5 Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 75-83.
- 6 Reinaldo Arenas, *Celestino antes del alba* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, S. A., 1972), pp. 9-11.
- 7 Neumann, *The Great Mother*, p. 83.
- 8 Arenas, *Celestino*, pp. 13-14.
- 9 Alberto Baeza Flores, “Dharma, Roberto Valero, El marielismo y compañía,” en Roberto Valero, *Dharma* (Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1985), solapa.
- 10 José Lezama Lima, “Sonetos infieles,” *Enemigo Rumor en Obras Completas* vol. 1 (México: M. Aguilar Editor, S. A., 1975), p. 693.
- 11 Reinaldo Arenas, *Antes que anochezca (Autobiografía)* (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, S. A., 1992), p. 221.
- 12 Heberto Padilla, *En mi jardín pastan los héroes* (Barcelona: Editorial Argos Vergara, S. A. , 1981), p. 179.
- 13 Neumann, *Ibid.*
- 14 Reinaldo Arenas, *Arturo, la estrella más brillante* (Barcelona: Montesinos Editor, S. A. 1984), pp. 90-91.
- 15 Reinaldo Arenas, *El asalto* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1991), pp. 137- 141.

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