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The Search for Authentic Man in *As Mãos de Eurídice*

Pedro Bloch's *As Mãos de Eurídice*, presented over fifteen thousand times since its 1950 premiere in Rio, has been a veritable blockbuster. Considered to be Bloch's masterpiece,[1] it won the Brazilian Academy's first theater prize, the Prêmio Artur Azevedo. Several of its interpreters have received the best-actor awards for its performance, among them Rodolfo Mayer in Brazil and Enrique Guitart in Spain, where, by 1953, the play had been performed over one thousand times.[2]

In my opinion, the play does not owe its astonishing success to the plot, which, once unravelled, turns out to be quite weak and all too common. Having deserted his children and Dulce, his wife, for Eurídice, seven years earlier, Gumercindo Tavares da Silva now returns home. His romantic odyssey has left him a total wreck, a victim of poverty, anxiety and defeat. The sight of the house and the resistance of the locked door bring about a mad rush of memories which give birth to the now famous monologue. In a subtle way, the monologue itself becomes a plea for atonement, for justification and exoneration from guilt. Following this highly emotional cathartic outburst, Gumercindo feels that he is ready to begin life all over again. Like Ulysses, after years of wandering, he has finally come "home." He realizes the profound significance of his return as he utters in the final scene, "I am back, Dulce, I am back." Even though the high drama and the monologue technique somewhat obscure the plot, it turns out to be a simple story of desertion and return, all too common in life and literature.

The play's success stems from the remarkable adaptation of post-Brechtian techniques, some of which have become the characteristic trademarks of contemporary drama. These techniques include absence of dialogue, total reliance on monologue delivery, audience participation and use of temporal and spatial collage.

The entire play consists of a monologue delivered by one character, Gumercindo Tavares, who, with the help of the audience, emotionally relives his life's happenings over the past fifteen years or so. The continuous attempts to involve the audience in participation are evident in the character's sharing of telegrams, papers, pictures, etc., and requesting the opinion of individual members on several matters. The following excerpts, all directed at the audience, exemplify different types of audience involvement technique:

"Eu não sei se os senhores conheceram o Dr. Hermengardo"
"O senhor, naturalmente, vai dizer . . ."
"Esta é a fotografia de Eurídice"
"Eu queria que o senhor me explicasse" (102).[3]

Anticipating a technique later perfected by means of the spatio-temporal stage partition in Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*, Pedro Bloch uses a technique of collage in which he blends moments from all parts of the past together in a kaleidoscopic fashion, such as in the excerpt that follows (pp. 100–101):

> E as pirâmides imensas, majestosas, colossais, se erguiam em minha frente.
>
> E maior que tôdas as pirâmides se erguia majestosa d. Gervásia falando... falando . . . falando . . .
>
> Amenemat I . . . Amenemat II . . . Amenemat III . . . E a esfinge falava, gritava, urrava . . .
>
> Desvendado o segrêdo da esfinge! A esfinge falou, senhores! A esfinge falou!
>
> E do fundo do areal imenso surgia a voz da declamadora insaciável, incansável, infindável . . .
>
> »Con tu amor soñamos,
> por tu fe vivimos,
> Señora del Mar.«
>
> Prêto! . . . 23! Vermelho! . . . 34! No va más! Hagan juego, señores! Hagan juego, imbéciles! Hagan juego!
>
> As mãos de Eurídice pediam fichas, mais fichas, MAIS FICHAS . . . E a roleta engulindo insaciável, incansável, infindável . . .
>
> Dó—ré—mi—fá—sol—fá—mi—ré—dó—ré—mi—fá—sol—fá—mi—ré—dó . . .
>
> Chegou a modista? . . . O plissé? . . . O babado? . . . O bordado? . . . O apliqué? . . . Tem figurino? . . . Cabeleireiro às 10? E as unhas? Madame Mendonça chamou? Hoje tem »buraco«?
>
> Hagan juego, señores. Hagan juego.
>
> As mãos de Eurídice depositam fichas, docemente, suavemente.
>
> E a valsa de Chopin atravessa a sala como se fôsse escrita com serpentes, com cobras venenosas, a envenenar a alma com açúcar, com a doçura pegajosa de Chopin.
>
> E surgem pés monstruosos e mãos monstruosas! Mãos e pés de Portinari carregando pedras monstruosas, ao som de uma valsa de Chopin . . . ao som das polonaises . . .
>
> Milhares e milhares de escravos egípcios desfilam arrastando pedras gigantescas para a construção da grande pirâmide de Quéope.
>
> E o garôto vinha com a patinete pela sala. Fuiiiiin! . . . Fuiiiiiin!
>
> E a menina acalentava a boneca em seus braços:
>
> »Dorme, filhinha, do meu tolatão«.

In these few fragments, the audience sees reflected Gumercindo's whole life. One can easily see that the collage technique as expressed through a vocalized interior monologue is indeed a powerful and effective tool for evoking a highly-charged emotional response. In another

medium, the novel, mediocre or common plots have often been rescued by new techniques that led to insights hitherto unexpected from the plot. I need mention only the case of Joyce's *Ulysses* or Virginia Woolfe's *To the Lighthouse*. In the novel, this particular technique of interior monologue and its consequent reconstruction of consciousness has shown itself remarkably appropriate for an expression, a study, or an analysis of alienation. Titles such as *Le rouge et le noir, Notes from the Underground, The Immoralist, Remembrance of Things Past, The Stranger, Nausea*, etc., are a few of the notable examples which use the interior monologue technique to focus on alienation.

Since dialogue, as well as its corollary, monologue, is, as it should be, a specialty of drama, could not a monologue of reconstruction of consciousness in drama also become a vehicle for expression of alienation as it has in the novel? In *The Iceman Cometh*, Eugene O'Neill travelled a long way by means of the monologue technique into a study of alienation. This fact has led me to test *As Mãos de Eurídice* against some standard theories of alienation.

In searching for a working definition of alienation, I was able to evolve a coherent view of it based on the writings of several modern existentialists. In the introduction to their anthology on alienation entitled *Man Alone*,[4] the editors, Mary and Eric Josephson, discuss the many ways in which the term alienation is used by philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists to refer to a variety of psycho-social disorders, including loss of self, anxiety states, depersonalization, restlessness, social disorganization, meaninglessness, etc.[5] Their conclusion, which follows, is most helpful in establishing a protean definition.

> Whatever the approach, central to the definition of alienation is the idea that man has lost his identity or self-hood. . . . What this means is that the person who experiences self-alienation is not only cut off from the springs of his own creativity, but is thereby also cut off from groups of which he would otherwise be a part; and he who fails to achieve a meaningful relationship with others is deprived of some part of himself.[6]

William Barrett in *Irrational Man* presents Heidegger's explanation of the loss of self. Heidegger, through an elaborate process, explains the loss of self as almost intentional. In his perception, modern man seeks every possible device of self-evasion, since he cannot face himself.[7] Furthermore, in Heidegger's terms, man can only be free to become himself when he takes death unto himself. According to Heidegger, then, death is the pre-condition *sine qua non* for the emergence of an authentic existence.[8]

Without resorting to the use of the word itself, Eric Fromm explains in real and concrete terms how alienation manifests itself on the level of daily life and he names some of the real motives for the desertion of the self. In his view, man must be productive in order to be able to come to terms with himself. "Only by making productive use of his powers can

man feel one with himself and the world."[9] If, for whatever reason, man should fail to use his powers productively, he will experience alienation; "he is torn and split, he is driven to escape from himself, from the feeling of powerlessness, from boredom and impotence which are the necessary results of his failure."[10] The solution, according to Eric Fromm, lies in man's learning how to listen to his inner self, which Fromm calls the true voice of conscience.[11] By listening he can achieve happiness, which to Fromm is "the answer to the problem of human existence; the productive realization of his potentialities, and, thus, simultaneously, being one with [sic] the world and preserving the integrity of his self."[12]

Like Fromm, Sartre places on man himself the responsibility for losing or gaining his life and self. Sartre places a special emphasis on man's freedom of choice. Hence, in Sartre's view, man must choose to lead an authentic existence, which is Sartre's equivalent to Fromm's integrated productive existence. An integral part of the freedom of choice is man's acceptance of his responsibility for the choice itself as well as the consequent sense of guilt.

In summary then, Heidegger, Fromm and Sartre view alienation as a loss of self or identity as defined by Josephson. All three place squarely upon man himself the responsibility for such loss: Heidegger sees man's self-desertion as almost intentional; Fromm and Sartre view it as man's choice not to lead an authentic life. Sartre thinks that man can choose to lead an "authentic existence," but does not explain how he can achieve this. In Fromm's thinking,, man can choose the "integrated productive existence" by listening to the "true voice of his conscience." Heidegger, however, sees man's choice as entirely related to Death. Man can choose an authentic existence, or in his terms can "be free to be himself" only when he has taken Death upon himself, meaning when he has faced, and come to grips with, Death.

Testing the play, *As Mãos de Eurídice*, against the above theories of alienation, I suggest the following thesis. *As Mãos de Eurídice*, in dramatic form, represents the long journey that is the search for the authentic man, the inner self, from the edges of selflessness.

Act I summarizes Gumercindo's total state of alienation, his escape from the self, prior to his leaving home. He feels completely powerless in controlling his environment. His wife, his children, his in-laws control it entirely, as can be seen in the opening outburst summarized earlier. "Em casa eu não podia abrir a boca" (97).

Even though he is not quite aware of it, he is completely nonproductive. When he works, his job is unsatisfactory as implied by the veiled boredom in the following line, "Eu vinha do meu trabalho cautelosamente, prudentemente, vagarosamente" (98). And, at one point, he doesn't even have a job, which is indicated by his repeating Dulce's remonstration, "E porque não trabalhava mais." His lack of productivity is further accentuated when it becomes revealed, in Act II, that he has spent all of the money which belonged to Dulce, who had apparently

been quite rich. But what makes his lack of productivity most significant in terms of alienation is the fact that he cannot succeed at the one job he considers important: writing. Though he considers himself a writer, all of his works are as yet unpublished. "Inéditas, sim, brasileiros! Porque uma campanha de inveja, inveja—repito, acompanha o meu trabalho intelequitual" [sic] (99). But by passing on the responsibility for this failure to Lins do Rêgo, Jorge Amado, Joracy Camargo, he removes from himself the responsibility for his success.

Because he is neither independent nor self-fulfilled, Gumercindo cannot stand Dulce's ability to lead an independent, productive life, as symbolized by her leadership of the *Grêmio Lítero Musical Esportivo*. Gumercindo mocks the Grêmio and Dulce's role in it. "Dulce era a presidenta. Dá para acabar com un Gumercindo Tavares ou não dá?" (96). His mocking intolerance is best conveyed in the two ridiculing statements below which show just how he perceives Dulce's artistic expertise. "Quando casei... Dulce... pensava que Beethoven era jogador de futebol" (94). This is in quite a contrast to the accomplished Dulce, president of the Grêmio. "Um dia encontrei Dulce explicando Portinari a Portinari" (95). Dulce's life was productive. From the innocent country girl she had become a sophisticated appreciator of arts and music. Gumercindo could not accept her success and hence refused to give her any credit for her newly acquired knowledge. Furthermore, Dulce's productivity surrounded Gumercindo with examples of all human productivity: Chopin's waltzes, paintings of Portinari, discussions of excavations of the pyramids and the Sphinx, poetry recitals, etc. Surrounded by all these immortal examples of human productivity, Gumercindo felt even more keenly the lack of his own, as evidenced by his lashing at all of it with deriding, derrogatory remarks.

Not only is his alienation evident in his relationship with Dulce, but it is also further evidenced by his whole attitude toward society. He can neither accept, nor tolerate, any social demands upon his person nor can he establish meaningful social relationships. These relationships in the context of his parents-in-law, ladies' teas, *O Grêmio Feminino*, the get-togethers, and the waltzes of Chopin, are all futile and arid. "Com o Dom Hermengardo eu me sentia mumificado, com dona Gervásia eu me sentia devastado, arrasado, aniquilado" (99). He finds himself wanting and inadequate. This estrangement is further accentuated by his inability to accept even the most simple rules of behavior as attested to by Dulce's admonitions. "E faça a barba. E não me envergonhe. E vista-se direito, etc. . ." (99).

Confronted with his life, wife, and society, he is filled with a sense of estrangement, ineptitude and inadequacy. He feels this is a life he must escape. "E eu queria fugir, fugir para muito longe. Para longe de d. Gervásia, longe de Chopin, longe da patinete, longe de Dulce," etc. (101). In this state of alienation from home and family, he encounters Eurídice, who seems to be all things Dulce is not. Eurídice is all love and promise.

Her hands are to serve him alone, to cater to every one of his wishes. Eurídice shows no concern for anything other than Gumercindo. Certainly she could not care about money, for how else could she lose it so "absolutamente sem nervos" (103). Eurídice needed him, Gumercindo needed her. Her need for him filled the void in his life. "Nós tínhamos um ninho só para nós dois. Eurídice era a ternura, a doçura, a poesia feita mulher" (97).

Having presented in Act I the state of alienation in which Gumercindo had been immersed prior to his escape, Pedro Bloch skillfully recreates in Act II his character's desire for integration, for return to the self. Not only is the entire monologue in this act directed toward integration, but symbolically the setting is changed as well. While he is recounting his state of estrangement and alienation in Act I, Gumercindo, unable to find the key, cannot enter the house. Because he has found the key, in Act II, Gumercindo not only can enter the house, but he can also move freely in and out of the house. The outside wall no longer forms a barrier, for he can walk right through it. The symbolic implication is self-evident: Gumercindo Tavares has managed to establish contact with the inner self.

On the exernal level, this contact is reflected in his attempt to come to grips with guilt. In a loud voice, he thus proclaims that he is not guilty of all that had happened; he blames Dulce and vows revenge. His angry protest and accusation of Dulce immediately evoke the famous phrase "Methinks the lady doth protest too much." He himself might be aware of this guilt-projection process and thus, as he searches symbolically through the house, through stacks of paper and telegrams, he uncovers within his conscience the real reasons for his escape: he left because he could not face the responsibility of the children, nor could he confront illness as the threat of death upon them. He discovers a further fact he had refused to accept: his being unworthy of Dulce. Still unable to accept his own inadequacy, he blames her for not having held him back, for allowing him to leave. And, finally, he accepts the fact that his son has died, his daughter has married, his wife may be leaving him, and he himself has stared death right in the face, not by committing suicide, as he had intended, but by killing Eurídice, who had refused to give him back the jewels that could restore him to his family. Thus, finally, loudly and openly, he admits to the murder of Eurídice. But admitting that he has killed Eurídice places him in square confrontation with death, for his own death indeed may be the consequence of his admission of Eurídice's demise.

Having faced Eurídice's death, and perceiving the prospect of his own, he further realizes that he had escaped from happiness itself, for in showing his old photo to the audience, he emphasizes it was a photo of a happy man, the man he used to be in the old days. Hence, he finally comes to accept that it was Eurídice, or his choice of her, that had robbed him of his happiness. Her death, then, was justifiable and proper as symbolic of a choice that alienated him from himself and his happiness.

"Para salvar os filhos é preciso acabar com tôdas as Eurídices do mundo" (116).

Having, however, accepted the responsibility for Eurídice's death, he is now ready to accept others, all symbolized by Dulce's hands. "Eu quero as suas mãos, Dulce. As mãos que tocavam Chopin, as mãos que educavam meus filhos" (118), hands which are the quintessential expression of a productive existence, in contrast to the hands of Eurídice which, in gambling away money, represented a total waste of self. In the face of his own death that may soon be imminent he is ready to take a responsible stance.

In terms of the theory of alienation on the symbolic and psychological levels, this interplay between the loss and encounter of the self can be understood in the following way.

Like Orpheus, through Eurídice Gumercindo descends into Hell by abdicating the self completely and submerging himself in the total abyss of self-loss. The resulting suffering is represented on the real-life level by the complete loss of material possessions. Involuntarily, as in the myth, he must kill Eurídice and thus through her death he comes to grips with death in his life, which in Heidegger's terms is the only means for reconciliation with the self. Furthermore, Eurídice's death signifies the undoing of that part of himself which led him to evade the inner self. The recapturing of the jewels from Eurídice, then, can be viewed symbolically as his recapturing of the self.

Oscillating between the false conscience, the conscience of dependence, pleasure, and escape from responsibility represented by Eurídice, and the good conscience, the conscience of freedom and responsibility in Fromm's terms, Gumercindo Tavares achieves the encounter with the self. Faced with imprisonment and maybe death, Gumercindo accepts full responsibility for all his acts, including Eurídice's death. Therefore, he meets the essential criterion in Heidegger's terms for finding the authentic existence by taking death unto himself. Following the long Odyssey, Gumercindo has returned to himself. Hence, the profound significance of his words, "Dulce, I am back now, I am back," for the name Dulce itself can be interpreted as representing the inner self, which in other contexts has been called the soul.

Gumercindo's action parallels that of Orestes in Sartre's *The Flies*, which William Barrett summarized as follows: "In discharging his freedom, man also wills to accept his responsibility of it, [sic] thus becoming heavy with his own guilt."[13]

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NOTES

1. Oscar Fernández, "The Contemporary Theatre in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo 1953–1955, *Hispania* (Dec. 1956), p. 424.

2. "Contemporary Theatre," p. 424.
3. Pedro Bloch, *As Mãos de Eurídice in Teatro Brasileiro Contemporâneo*, ed. by Wilson Martins and Seymour Menton (New York: Appleton-Century, Crofts, 1966). All references are to this edition.
4. Eric and Mary Josephson, eds. *Man Alone* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1961), p. 12.
5. *Man Alone*, p. 13.
6. *Man Alone*, p. 15.
7. William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 220.
8. *Irrational Man*, p. 225.
9. Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1965), p. 221.
10. *Man for Himself*, p. 222.
11. *Man for Himself*, p. 174.
12. *Man for Himself*, p. 192.
13. *Irrational Man*, p. 252.