

FERNANDO ARRABAL'S "ARS AMANDI": THE THEME OF LOVE IN SELECTED PLAYS

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In his classic study, *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont makes the following statement: "What stirs lyrical poets to their finest flights is neither the delight of the senses nor the fruitful contentment of the settled couple, nor the satisfaction of love, but its *passion*."¹ The intensity of that passion and the concomitant anxiety it engenders make that theme especially propitious for Fernando Arrabal in his personal struggle to attain, through writing, a resolution of the conflicting psychic forces that originate in his childhood and dominate much of his literary production.² An examination of his treatment of the theme of love in a number of plays will provide insight into Arrabal's conscious search for psychic wholeness, the subconscious forces that come into play throughout that search, and the artistic process he employs in giving structure and dramatic impact to those concerns.

In his dramas Arrabal incorporates, beneath a superficial chaos and frenzy, a precise, mathematical structuring of material. Metamorphoses of characters, cyclical development of plot, and the repetition of motifs or even entire scenes all contribute to the ordering of ritualistic acts and extravagant ceremonies into meaningful patterns. Moreover, Arrabal's awareness of structure and the relationship of the parts to the whole is not limited to individual plays, but extends to the whole corpus of his work. This ability to integrate material from previous works into a new endeavor strikingly parallels that of his fellow Spanish avant-garde dramatist, Ramón del Valle-Inclán (1866-1936). Just as the latter's *Luces de bohemia* (*Bohemian Lights* [1920]) assesses the author's earlier modes of thought and aesthetic techniques,³ Arrabal's plays also resurrect motifs, characters, and themes and, in a similarly

autobiographical manner, reveal the psychological states and artistic concerns of the author. Arrabal's identification with his characters throughout his literary production provides direct insight into this development, making a chronological consideration of his works an especially fruitful method of inquiry.

His first play to deal explicitly with the theme of love is *Fando et Lis* (*Fando and Lis* [1956]). Arrabal provides a key to understanding the play and the psychic state of its author at the time of its conception when he stresses the idea of the impossibility of the love between Fando and Lis in a statement to Alain Schifres: "*Fando and Lis*: a man, a woman and the impossibility of their union, because the woman is paralyzed... It is the element of prohibition which creates an erotic, fruitful and unbearable tension... The great myths of our era are variations of the difficulty of loving, which itself creates love."⁴ This physical barrier to the fulfillment of love reflects a psychic barrier of far greater intensity. Arrabal's identification with his character, Fando, reflects his own situation at this stage in his life. His first trip to France (1954) followed by his enamored of Luce Moreau during the succeeding summer marked a turning point in Arrabal's life. His horizons began to expand; an awareness of future possibilities developed, albeit hesitatingly. Yet the horror of his past, the strength of his inferiority complex, the uncertainties and self-doubts remained as obstacles to all of his nascent ambitions. Paradoxically, according to psychiatrist Theodor Reik, these circumstances favor falling in love: "What pushes us to love is thus an effort to escape from internal discontent. It takes the place of an original striving for self-perfection and is related to ambition. To be in love fulfills this aspiration and is felt as an achievement."⁵

The play *Fando and Lis* symbolically captures Fando's primitive psychological state and portrays the psychic forces that impede the fulfillment of his love. The childlike tone of the play and viewpoint of its main characters reflect Arrabal's need to return to that perspective in order to deal with his own problems relating to an early stage in his psychic development. The "mother-problem" evident throughout his works is present here in the subconscious of the character Fando and is manifested through the projection on Lis of an archetypal *anima* strongly reflective of the mother's influence.⁶ Fando's feelings of guilt alternate with his

repressed desire to hurt and ultimately to kill the mother because of that guilt and the feeling of inadequacy she has instilled in him. As Françoise Raymond-Mundschau explains, if the normal sexual evolution is disturbed and concomitantly fixed at an infantile stage, the guilt-ridden desires for the mother are directed toward the woman in question in the form of sadistic impulses intended to wreak vengeance on that woman for the retardation suffered by the male.⁷ Lis controls the relationship; she is aware, albeit unconsciously, of Fando's psychic state and repressed feelings toward her, and she is able to manipulate his actions, invoking progressively violent sadistic acts from him. She finally induces him into the supreme act of violence: murder. Death can be a fulfilling climax to passion, as de Rougemont explains in his analysis of the Tristan myth,⁸ but for Fando it is defeating and ultimately tragic. Lis' paralysis symbolizes Fando's projected rationalization of his inability to fulfill a mature love for a woman because of the interference of the mother image. At the end of the play, he is a defeated, pathetic figure as he fulfills his promise to Lis to visit her grave with a dog and a flower. Fando's failure to free himself from his stultifying attachment to the archetypal devouring mother is implicit in the play; a direct confrontation of this traumatic psychological fixation is dramatized explicitly several years later in *Le Grand Ceremonial* (*The Grand Ceremonial*).

The Grand Ceremonial marks a turning point in Arrabal's career as a writer as well as in his treatment of the theme of love. Written in 1962, it corresponds to his contact with André Breton and the Surrealists. It is his most overtly psychological play in that it dramatizes in a direct and open manner his most deep-seated personal conflicts and neuroses. And it does so with an intensity approaching violence that is ultimately cathartic. The protagonist Cavanosa resembles Arrabal on several levels. His physical deformity (lame and hunchbacked) alludes to Arrabal's view of himself⁹ and also elucidates symbolically Cavanosa's psychological state. In some ways he is an adolescent Fando, an impassioned psychological cripple who desires to eradicate his mother's influence.

The two women in the play constitute an antithetical pair, as their names (Syl and Lis) indicate. Although there is some ambiguity concerning the repetitive nature of Cavanosa's experience with women, I would concur with Raymond-Mundschau's tentative

conclusion that Syl is really the first woman Cavanosa has dealt with on a non-fantasy basis.¹⁰ His precipitous and seemingly uncontrollable outbursts of violence toward Syl express the strength of his inner conflict; she represents both a means of revenge on his mother and, concomitantly, a threat to the stability of his love-hate relationship with that parent. Cavanosa dramatizes his fantasies and enacts his frustrations on the life-sized dolls that satisfy his repressed sexuality. He worships Syl, even enacting a religious ritual in which she is treated as a Christ figure. But after the climax of that ceremony, when he puts her into the pram, he makes a significant comment: "You're not paralyzed. What a pity."¹¹ This refers clearly to *Fando and Lis*. Although Cavanosa's love for Syl is not physically impossible, his psychic ills intervene to impede its fruition. Syl, like Lis in the earlier play, occupies a more sophisticated plane; her love for Cavanosa is inspired primarily by her pity for him. Although she calls for death at his hand, orgiastically urging him to choke her, that act, if implemented, would not have been fulfilling. As Allen Thiher observes: "his only gesture of love can be to kill the woman he has taken to bed—the bed being the altar on which he sacrifices to the demands of maternal love."¹² As in *Fando and Lis*, the female's death wish reflects the male character's projection of an *anima* based strongly on the mother. The latter, as Raymond-Mundschau explains, "aspires to the complete destruction of his being by the beloved person (she strives frenetically to have herself killed by her son's hand), a desire of which the incestuous overtures are merely one aspect."¹³ Syl's subservience to the psychic force of the mother is confirmed by the conclusion of her relationship with Cavanosa. She escapes death at the hands of her lover, but is relegated to a position of servility, not to Cavanosa, but to his mother. Were the play to end at this point, Cavanosa's psychic state (and by extension, the author's) would reveal relatively little change from that of the male protagonist's in *Fando and Lis*. But the appearance of the girl Lis changes the entire situation.

Lis does not view Cavanosa as monstrous and, accordingly, does not pity him. She also seeks refuge from a stifling home situation. As Bernard Gille states: "They are similar: their education has been one of repression."¹⁴ She accepts the charge to help kill Cavanosa's mother, thus becoming accomplice and lover, rather than

the victim of projected feelings inspired by and directed at the mother. At the play's conclusion, Lis persuades Cavanosa to take her away in the pram and leave the mother behind. The parallel with *Fando and Lis* is striking, but this Lis is not paralyzed, and this lover seems to have severed the stifling bond with the mother (the latter mutters, at the play's end: "I'm so unhappy"). Arrabal supports the view that Cavanosa has achieved a psychological triumph, stating: "He understands that his panoply, his defenses, will no longer be of any use to him with this girl who, instead of finding him monstrous, believes that he is very attractive. Because she has never seen a man. It is the loveliest 'happy ending' in all of my theater."¹⁵ And yet Cavanosa's final comment to Lis seems to belie this optimistic view of the play's conclusion. He says to her: "Let's go. Your eyes burn to look into my eyes, your hands are aflame to hold mine, your back is lily white for me to scourge, your voice is full of sorrow for your death" (p. 215). The nature of Lis' future death is somewhat ambiguous. Is it to be a reenactment of the myth of the destructive, yet exultant nature of passion, or is Cavanosa going to kill, like Fando, out of psychological impotence? Whether *The Grand Ceremonial* is to be viewed as a jubilant expression of love's triumph over psychic barriers, or as merely a step in that direction, remains uncertain; however, the release of psychic energy, the intensity of Cavanosa's internal struggle with himself, and the apparent severance of the overt bond to the mother confirm the significant evolution of the protagonist's (and the author's) view of himself and the love relationship.

Le Lai de Barabbas (*The Law of Barabbas*), originally titled *Le Couronnement* (*The Coronation* [1964]), advances the male character's psychic development another step—from adolescence to adulthood. The drama presents Giafar's initiation into understanding, knowledge and sexuality effected by a woman's love. In a magical ambience reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland* and Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (in its treatment of time and use of the mirror), two antithetical female characters, Sylva and Arlys, help Giafar to deal with his repressed sexuality. In direct contrast with *The Grand Ceremonial*, these women are not irreconcilable forces who elicit diverse reactions from the protagonist, but instead they coalesce into the generic Woman with sensual as well as motherly

aspects. This resolution of the fragmented view of women encountered in Arrabal's earlier plays constitutes a definite psychological advancement.

In the play, Giafra's progress is slow because his feelings of inadequacy are deep-seated. He loses Sylda before the play begins because, as he is finally able to admit, he failed to get to the rendezvous that was to encompass his initiation into sex. Giafar's feelings about that event have been repressed; that situation helps to explain the oneiric ambience of the play, because the action can only take place within the subconscious of the protagonist. In order to find the girl (and all that she represents), Giafar must witness the evolutionary pattern of her life—from her birth to her initiation into knowledge. He manages to do so with the assistance of her alter-ego, Arlys. The latter helps to prepare him for his own initiation ceremony by introducing him to the experience of physical love. Sylda then reappears in the company of Giafar's deceased mother. Although their dialogue is inaudible, it seems clear that the two women must collaborate, as together they control Giafar's sexual past, present and future and give shape to his emerging self concept. Before undergoing the final ceremony, Giafar must confront the psychically whole Arlys-Sylida. This seems doubly necessary in light of Giafar's comment to Arlys: I respect you. What we have done . . . It's a question of an accident and I excuse myself for it. I love you in a different way."¹⁶ Arlys-Sylida must now sacrifice her life to the phallic knife in order to assure the efficacy of the ceremony and to establish the importance of its sexual component. As Gille observes: "Knowledge is not possible for man except through knowing woman. For the being who feels painfully his imperfection and his incompleteness, the sexual act becomes the refound unity."¹⁷

Paradoxically, for the actual ceremony, Giafar's mother brings him back to his earliest psychic stage, when he desires her and rejects Arlys-Sylida, even expressing the wish to murder her. However, the document he must read and understand in order to complete the ceremony is entitled "Supreme Violence," which evokes Arrabal's often quoted statement that violence is at the core of all eroticism.¹⁸ Passion as murder is affirmed, and Giafar successfully makes the transition from adolescence into adulthood. The mother's power over him remains a disturbing note, but may be sym-

bolic of Giafar's spiritual and sexual rebirth, toward which Arlys-Sylda constituted a means and not an end. Reik's analysis of the psychology of love helps to clarify the situation. He presents the example of Dante, who, when first encountering Beatrice, remarked: "Incipit Vita Nova." Love, then, is an emotional rebirth, a means of freeing the individual from himself. Reik concludes: "The emotional upsurge in him is in great part due to his being able to rid himself of the conflict with which he has been loaded since childhood."¹⁹ The play's ceremony is a sort of personal renaissance made possible by love, which affirms the violence of eroticism and serves ultimately to liberate Giafar from himself and prepare him to accept and to deal knowledgeably with the contradictions in life and love.

Raymond-Mundschau's observation that the two women in the play are merely aspects of Giafar himself supports a view of the work in which time is suspended; birth, death and resurrection become one and the same, and dramatic structure derives from the movement from psychic fragmentation to psychic unity. Her explanation of Arlys-Sylda's sacrifice pinpoints the central theme of the drama. She states:

It is a part of himself which must be destroyed (the sacrifice of the young girl), but which one cannot eliminate entirely except by examining it thoroughly (initiator), up to the possibility, the only one of another life (the resurrection of Sylda), the adult life where, freed of the jumble of positive adolescent sentiments, man will be capable of seeing and accepting the female animal in her two guises, as sorceress and as fairy.²⁰

Arrabal's most explicit examination of the theme of love, his *Ars Amandi* (*The Art of Love* [1967]), also derives its structure from the protagonist's preparation for initiation into understanding and sexuality. Woman, in the generic sense, becomes a mythic figure that serves as a liaison between man and the world, with its paradoxes, illusions, and inconsistencies. The age of the play's protagonist Fridigan is indicated as thirty years; this specificity is unique in Arrabal's work and helps to establish the mature nature of the emotions that are to be considered.

The essence of the drama's view of love is contained in its second scene. After Lys has appeared as the mythical giantess

representing Woman, the key force in life, she reappears, transformed much like Alice in Wonderland, to normal size. She paints the letters NON ("no") on a large canvas; but, paradoxically, the model she copies says OUI ("yes"). The contradictory nature of love is reflected in this initial image; Fridigan's final initiation will depend on his cognizance of that dualism and his ability to synthesize and cope with it. Throughout the play, language, events, moods and the use of visual effects combine to underscore the antithetical nature of Lys' character. She is tender and maternal one moment, then cruel and aloof the next. Her servants, Bana and Ang, speak of her with reverent tones, then abruptly denounce her as a bloodthirsty vipe. (The elusive nature of reality and the master-servant relationship is reminiscent of Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes* — *The Maids*.) As Fridigan slowly moves toward understanding, he becomes increasingly aware of the dialectical nature of eroticism. The words he uses to express his love to Lys emphasize his emerging perception of the nature of things: "And you, my labyrinth of fascinations and repugnances."²¹ Arrabal reinforces this central antinomy with an image that appears in the stage directions accompanying this declaration: "A thousand butterflies cross the stage with the noise of tanks" (p. 58).

Fridigan's education is slow and painful. As in the *Law of Barabbas*, he cannot accelerate the process of understanding. Recalling the initial image of Lys as a giantess covered with insects, he is beaten and gagged by Bana and Ang. The servants, psychic projections of Fridigan's thoughts and feelings, prevent him from dealing with the mythic nature of Lys. Their repression of Fridigan's memory (a component of his collective unconscious) indicates his unwillingness to confront fully the forces of Woman and love. Significantly, after his suffering, he is able to feel and express his love for Lys as an individual woman, bare-breasted and alluring. Before Fridigan can cope with love and Woman on a mythic level, he must first experience consciously the physical manifestations of sexual attraction.

Another structural component of the work is Fridigan's constant search for his lost friend, Erasmus Marx. Throughout the play, references to that character appear in a myriad of bizarre, ingenious forms. It is implied that Marx was "abducted" by Lys, and Fridigan is to suffer a similar fate. Only after Fridigan has been

initiated, having accepted the idea of dying at Lys' hand, does Erasmus Marx reappear to him. And at the play's conclusion, the two men appear in the form of insects on the body of Lys which has been restored to its original gigantic proportions. If the name Erasmus Marx can be interpreted to symbolize the intellectual comprehension of spiritual and social forces in life, then Fridigan's search for his lost friend would represent his attempt to gain understanding of man and his place in the world. That the understanding can be obtained only through an intermediary (woman) and that all other forces in life are ultimately subservient to the erotic passion that is both life-giving and violently destructive emerge as the central themes of the work.

The climax of the play depicts the violence that Arrabal considers central to genuine eroticism. Before the final ceremony can take place, Lys forces Fridigan to wallow in the mud with pigs that discharge excrement on him. She then joins him, and they embrace in the mire. The sublimity of love is shown to be inextricably linked to the most ignoble feelings and acts. The earlier image of Lys carrying a servant on her shoulders while another grovels before her, kissing her belly, is linked to this scene. Love is heaven and earth, the base and the exalted, the "oui" and the "non" projected at the beginning of the play. Fridigan, having accepted it as such, is now free to take his place along with Erasmus Marx on Lys' giant body, representative of the endearing yet devouring force that is woman.

The evolutionary treatment of the theme of love in Arrabal's plays reaches a climax in the short piece *Bestialité érotique* (*Erotic Bestiality* [1968]). In that work, the dual nature of love presented in *The Art of Love* is reiterated, but its reconciliation culminates in a triumphant expression of the ethereal purity of human passion. As Franco Tonelli comments, the play "gives dramatic life to eroticism in its absolute purity without the interference of any moral, psychological or sociological contingency dissipating its primal essence."²²

In preparing for this climactic expression of the heavenly component of love, Arrabal must first traverse the depths of earthy lust. In so doing, he seizes the opportunity to exercise his mordant sense of humor. Asan and Alima, the two lovers, arrive on female and male horses (played by actors) which represent the animal

passions in man. The mare and stallion accentuate the mood of the first scene by their desperate attempts to give full expression to their lust despite the restrictions imposed upon them by their harnesses. Asan and Alima express their passion for one another in inverse terms; their mutual flattery takes the form of grotesque insults rapturously received:

ALIMA—You are atrocious, you are very ugly, uglier than the most repulsive of water bugs.

ASAN—What a marvelous day, since the gods are preparing me for such great happiness.²³

Arrabal makes the most of his opportunity; the dialogue is replete with grotesqueries of this sort. Asan and Alima also reassure one another that their flatteries are sincere; each reveals a deep-seated inferiority complex, as they express their fears that they may actually be attractive.

The first and longer scene culminates in a perverse demonstration of base passion: Asan and Alima frenetically lick one another's feet while the horses mirror their growing excitation. The calm that follows sexual climax is accompanied by romantic opera music. The horses depart in a flying ship, and when the lovers awaken, the entire mood is changed, as indicated by the lyrical quality of the dialogue. Asan and Alima recognize the necessity of their previous state in order to free themselves and fulfill their love:

ASAN—Until today, we have lived in a parody.

ALIMA—It is the lost memory.

ASAN—And the preparation. (p. 143)

The poetic quality of the scene is evidenced by many passages; one noteworthy example is the following:

ALIMA—You are full freshness, the sea sleeps around your waist.

ASAN—You are the dream of the ship.

ALIMA—We will explode and God will preside over our union. (p. 144)

The lovers express a desire for children and reference is made to the sands of Melilla, an image evoking Arrabal's long-lost father

and suggesting (in a manner similar to the conclusion of his film *Viva la muerte* — "Long Live Death") the triumph over the mother's nefarious influence. The play ends with a spiritual and physical affirmation of love as the couple embraces.

The succession of plays studied reveals an evolution in which the stifling complexes attributable to the influence of the mother and her role in the author's sexual development are gradually and painfully exorcized and resolved. Although the individual plays generally derive their structure from the cyclical nature of life and its inescapable labyrinths, the plays as a group, considered in chronological order, reveal a linear progression in which the childhood world is followed by adolescence and then by adulthood, with an accompanying resolution of primitive repressions and conflicts. *Erotic Bestiality*, with its linear structure, reflects this overall movement and constitutes a climactic expression of liberation and joyful, uplifting eroticism.

NOTES

¹ New York: Pantheon Books, 1956, p. 15.

² Arrabal's bizarre childhood, which has been well publicized, included the arrest of his father at the outbreak of the Civil War, the suppression of all evidence of that parent's existence, and the constraints of a female dominated, devoutly religious home. Details of his early experiences can be found in his autobiographical novel, *Baal Babylone*, and in his lengthy interview with Alain Schifres, *Entretiens avec Arrabal* (Paris: Editions Pierre Belfond, 1969). The best concise summary of these events and their impact on Arrabal is found in Raymond-Mundschau's *Arrabal* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1972).

³ A fine discussion of Máximo Estrella's evolving insight into his own (and by extension, the author's) character and perceptions of social and aesthetic questions is contained in Anthony Zahareas' and Sumner Greenfield's introduction to their edition of *Divinas palabras* and *Luces de bohemia* (New York: Las Americas Publishing Company, 1974).

⁴ Schifres, pp. 119-120. All of the translations in this study are my own.

⁵ *Of Love and Lust: On the Psychoanalysis of Romantic and Sexual Emotions* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 29.

⁶ For a discussion of the anima archetype and the phenomenon of projection, consult C. G. Jung, *Psyche and Symbol* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1958), pp. 9-22.

⁷ Raymond-Mundschau, p. 95.

⁸ de Rougemont, p. 21.

⁹ Arrabal's inferiority complex and self-deprecation are patently evident in some of his comments to Alain Schifres: "I saw myself as a dwarf

with an enormous head . . . At that time, I considered myself to be a monster" (p. 26).

¹⁰ Raymond-Mundschau, p. 48.

¹¹ *Plays, II* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967), p. 167. All subsequent references to this play will be taken from this same edition.

¹² "Fernando Arrabal and the New Theater of Obsession," *Modern Drama*, 13 (1970), p. 176.

¹³ Raymond Mundschau, p. 52.

¹⁴ *Fernando Arrabal* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1970), p. 79.

¹⁵ Schifres, p. 128.

¹⁶ *Théâtre IV* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1969), p. 151.

¹⁷ Gille, p. 84.

¹⁸ See Raymond-Mundschau, pp. 111-115, for a consideration of Arrabal's ideas concerning the role of violence in eroticism.

¹⁹ Reik, p. 62.

²⁰ Raymond-Mundschau, p. 65.

²¹ *Théâtre VIII: Deux Opéras Paniques* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1970), p. 58. All subsequent references to *The Art of Love* will be taken from this edition.

²² Review of Fernando Arrabal's *Théâtre VI*, *French Review*, 43, no. 4 (March, 1970), p. 27.

²³ *Théâtre VI* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1969), p. 134. All subsequent references to *Erotic Bestiality* will be taken from this edition.