

# Reviews

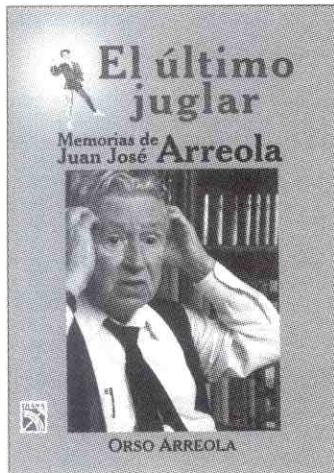
## El último juglar Memorias de Juan José Arreola

(The Last Minstrel. Memoirs of Juan José Arreola)

Orso Arreola

Diana

Mexico City, 1998, 422 pp.



*What is this interval between me and me?*

Fernando Pessoa

“The word most difficult to pronounce and conveniently situate is ‘I,’” wrote Juan José Arreola (Zapotlán el Grande, Jalisco, 1918-) in his personal diary in 1943, when he was 25 years old and had been living six years in Mexico City. The young man, impetuous and sensitive, “his pride injured” from a disappointment in love, but with the intensity of someone seeking to recover, evokes the spirit of the French poet Alfred de Vigny in his diary and through him, the object of his constant desire, and gives a finer shade of meaning: “To love, to invent, to admire: this is my life.” Was the acting student using this statement to overcome the vertigo he suffered from because

of the abysses and chaos of his personal identity? Was he foretelling his destiny in some way? How close did he get to the object of his desire, he who now makes us a gift of his memoirs like someone who accepts finishing a cycle at the age of 80?

The meaning of these questions is clear if we first understand something he said a few decades ago: “I am of the confessional genre. I am a man who seeks a confidant. Very often I throw the heavy duty content at someone I have just met, like a dump truck. I want to die without a single one of my actions remaining hidden. My life—even to the most shameful—dwells among priests in my childhood and doctors in my youth, and men and women friends from all periods. I’m still wearing one last T-shirt. To the bone, then!”

Juan José Arreola, or the “sentimental monopoly” of confession, if you like, but, we cannot elude this character trait that makes him akin to our first modern poet, Ramón López Velarde (born in Jerez, Zacatecas; 1880-1921): he also liked confession and his commitment to language had moral roots, built like a critical system and an examination of conscience. Similarly, Juan José Arreola’s memoirs confirm what he had already said under the mask of a creator of fictions, in his short prose (*Confabulario* [Confabulation], *Palíndroma* [Palindrome], *Varia invención* [Other Inventions], *Bestiario* [Bestiary]), and in his only novel (*La feria* [The Fair]). In *El último juglar*, once again we find the doubtful style, the sinuous outline, the thoughtful reflection or the rectification of previously commented upon events, the time of the fragmenting memory, the fear—the same kind of fear that plagued Saint Augustine, Villon and Montaigne—of leaving this world “without understanding it or oneself.”

Although as readers of Arreola, we can put his complete works on a bookshelf and discover in his fiction a unifying design, reading *El último juglar. Memorias de Juan José Arreola* involves us as confidants of both the artist and the man, opening up a critical distance with the character who in this way invites us to go more deeply into his secret self. Neither can we ignore that the mature man—not the public personage—has stated several times his

disloyalty to the craft of writing because of having dedicated too much time to women, chess and literature. This is a disquieting confession that, 55 years after his 1943 personal diary entry, likens him to the old aristocrat Alfred de Vigny, secluded in the gloomy castle of Turón, continually regretting with inconsolable melancholy having wasted his life.

Memory and oblivion are intertwined in this “long, labyrinthine conversation” between Orso Arreola and his father, making a more finely sifted picture of the man and the artist possible. We cannot at all, however, fix exact limits between the two and, after all, perhaps it is not worth trying. “I play myself; I invented my own character and I will die with him; I am the other who has never been happy with himself; I am the one who stood staring at his face in the mirror and could no longer get out of it; for better or for worse, I have been my own performance.”

The difficulty in finding the image that brings together Arreola’s desideratum is precisely the center of interest in this vast circumnavigation. But it also pushes the reader of *El último juglar* to jump the intervals, those “shreds of reports” that Paul Valéry talked about when he tried to establish the continuity of a whole life of a well known individual who has become part of our imagination. In the case of Arreola, the images in the minds of his contemporaries are those of an ironic writer, the pessimistic lover, the teacher who expected nothing in return, the university professor who in 1968 protested the massacre at Tlatelolco, the cultured, sharp polemicist or conversationalist, the steadfast friend, the generous, daring editor, the actor and lover of classical theater, the cultural promoter, the husband and the father. However, the complementary, or even fragmentary or contradictory, facets of personality, as well as the long cycles and grand temporary perspectives, are what spur a good reader of memoirs.

Orso Arreola had the good sense to include considerable portions of the diaries from Juan José Arreola’s youth, as well as absolute jewels like the letter Julio Cortázar wrote him from Paris in September 1954. I cannot resist the temptation of transcribing here some comments from that letter: “And I think the best thing about *Confabulario* and *Varia invención* comes from the fact that you have what Rimbaud called “*le lieu et la formule*,” the way of taking the bull by the horns and —Ah!— not by the tail like so many others who wear out the print shops of this world.” And another: “I am amazed at what you are able to achieve with so little verbal material.”

The best homage and show of affection that we can make to Juan José Arreola is in not admiring or abusing him confusedly and in daring, when reading *El último juglar*, to reconstruct the character. Because, when all is said and done, we cannot and do not want to be free of him. ■■

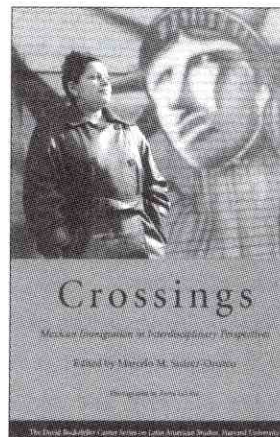
Mauricio Grobet Vallarta  
Mexican writer and editor

### Crossings: Mexican Immigration In Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, editor

The David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies,  
Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998, 440 pp.



As a one-volume study on Mexican immigration, *Crossings* successfully synthesizes much research currently being done on what editor Suárez-Orozco considers to be the key issue in understanding the mosaic of recent Mexican immigration to the United States. Based on a conference held at Harvard University in April 1997, and developed as a project of the newly expanded David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard, *Crossings* brings together distinguished U.S. and Mexican researchers from several disciplines in examining Mexican immigration through distinctive methodologies and perspectives.