

Arreola

The Magician of Midday¹

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In Arreola we have lost the last of the great twentieth-century Mexican writers. Without José Revueltas, without Juan Rulfo and without Octavio Paz, and now, without Juan José, we have been orphaned, something no less painful because it was predictable. Arreola's work was written essentially between *Confabulario* (1949) and *La feria* (The Fair) (1963). Through "other inventions" his work parallels the "fictions" of Borges, his older brother, who offered him the recognition that cannot help but be repeated: "I have seldom seen him; I remember one afternoon we talked about the last adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym." In prose, Arreola's brevity fed imaginations like Julio

Cortázar's —something he told Juan José in a letter in 1954— and many other Latin American writers. Neither Martín Luis Guzmán nor Alfonso Reyes had the influence that Arreola did on the community of the language, because of his facility for introducing the fantastic into everyday life, always creating perfect pieces that would be read as stories or as prose poems. While some writers' example frightens and paralyzes like Rulfo, others lavish themselves on creating a school. Arreola's touch is visible in authors as distinct as the Uruguayan Armonía Sommers, Augusto Monterroso or the Catalanian Enrique Vila-Matas.

In a literature that prided itself on its cartridge belts, like Mexico's at the end of the 1940s, Arreola (1918-2001) took Julio Torri's road and eliminated all ostentation, vulgarity

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and didacticism from our prose. His narrative —to give it a name— was like a limpid dawn after the bellicose terrors of the night. A curious kind of fantastic writer covered with fairies and not by fabulous monsters, a kind of clock-maker who broke the span of hours of light.

A half century ago, a critique —always risky— tried to counterpose Rulfo to Arreola, Mexicanism to universality, realism to fantasy. A false dilemma: the Scandinavians consider Rulfo a national author because his theme is not the Altos de Jalisco, but the myth, common to all civilizations, of a city of the dead that dreams after the destruction of the agrarian community. Arreola, his pride perhaps wounded by that complaint, tried a novel, *La feria*, whose parts were brilliant, but, in my opinion, was flawed as a whole.

Friends and accomplices, Rulfo and Arreola were both writers of fantasy, if by fantasy we understand freedom of imagination, a transit back and forth between Hades and

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everyday life. Brothers, Rulfo and Arreola divided between them the hours of Mexican prose. One personified night; the other, day.

Fortunately, many of Arreola's students will remember now an education that went beyond words, a provider of ingenuity and practical enterprises, like literary workshops or independently publishing what were at the time very young authors like Carlos Fuentes, Fernando del Paso, José Agustín, José Carlos Becerra, Beatriz Espejo, Eduardo Lizalde, Vicente Leñero, José Emilio Pacheco, Sergio Pitol, Tita Valencia, in the *Los Presentes* and *Cuadernos del Unicornio* [book collections] and [the magazine] *Mester*. It is an impressive list, as is the affection for him of three generations of writers, who had in Arreola something more than a university: an entire literature, that included everything from galley correction to Marcel Schwob and the Golden Age.

Christian and sinner, minstrel and deceiver, actor of the Comédie Française, enemy of all forms of solitary life, a man in search of communion with his brethren to the point of becoming lost, Arreola also had his failings. I remember with shame those television programs which ended up being grist

for the malicious mill of boorish sports commentators. A small matter, undoubtedly, next to the moral and intellectual mistakes that we writers often make.

I met Juan José in my childhood since my father, José Luis Domínguez Camacho was his psychiatrist, who he was very grateful to, according to Orso Arreola in *El último juglar. Memorias de Juan José Arreola* (The Last Minstrel. Memoirs of Juan José Arreola [Mexico City: Diana, 1998]). I saw him for the last time in Guadalajara in December 1996 when I accompanied him to his launch of *Antiguas primicias* (Old First Fruits), a handful of verse from his youth, which was the pretext for Juan José talking about Jean Paul, Schopenhauer, Léautaud, Saint Teresa, Papini, Saint Paul, whose spirits turned the lecture hall into a devil's cauldron.

I remember my father and Arreola playing chess for long, inevitable hours, and once, playing tennis, dressed in clothing that made Juan José look like a combination of elf and dandy. Each of Arreola's visits to the house brought with it the possibility that Pandora's box would open up and out would come not all the ills of the world that Prometheus had gathered, but a gush of quotes, poems and books. One day Arreola was very frightened when he arrived: he had fallen asleep while reading *Monsieur Proust*, the work that Céleste Albaret, Proust's housekeeper, dedicated to the French novelist. When he awoke, a dream within a dream or a terrifying ghost, Proust himself appeared to Arreola and reproached him, according to Juan José's tortured narrative, his neglect of his literary obligations. I never knew, given the confidential nature of the psychiatrist's couch, how my father managed to calm him down. But ever since then, my whole family reads Proust. Since at the bottom of Pandora's box all that remains is hope, we will not falter until there is another apparition. **MM**

NOTES

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