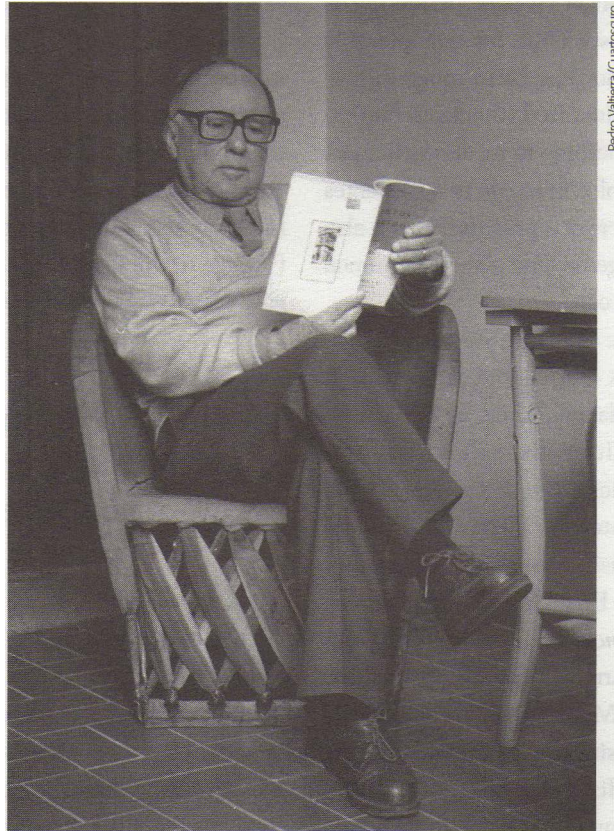


# Augusto Monterroso

## A Master of Brevity and Irony

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Few things in contemporary literature are comparable to Augusto Monterroso (1921-2003). Father of a literature that made brevity a new genre, his work will be remembered for his very unusual ability to make an entire tradition out of a few books. That is how Christopher Domínguez expresses it: Monterroso's work is a school of taste and "a tradition in and of itself."

Now, it is paradoxical that one of the masters of contemporary narrative is, precisely, the author of "El dinosaurio"

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(The Dinosaur), undoubtedly the shortest story in the history of universal literature. In that sense, it is not by chance that another of the unquestionable, Italo Calvino—a writer raised to the heights of the canon of Western narrative, and also a brilliant essayist and the theoretician of "lightness" as one of the essential elements of the literature to come—situates Augusto Monterroso as nothing less than "a paradigm of modernity." In effect, together with "lightness" in writing, Monterroso seems to comply with all the values put forth by Calvino in his famous proposition *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*: quickness, exactitude, visibility, multiplicity and consistency. An extreme example of all this

would be, without a doubt, the complete text of the aforementioned short story: "Upon awakening, the dinosaur was still there."

However, it is not in the tradition of modernity that one should seek out Monterroso's Lares, his masters. He himself reminds us in the pages of his intermittent memoirs that as an adolescent he read in his city's library —"such a bad library that it only had good books"—Horace's *Epistle to the Pisos* which points to contention as one of the best aspirations of rhetoric. Not many authors of Hispanic letters are as close to the classics as Monterroso. Thus, for example, it is clear that his epigrammatic humor has Latin roots; the re-invention of fable as a genre acclimatized (thanks to him) to our skeptical modernity says something to us of a writer not far removed from the concerns of a Quevedo or a Cervantes more than a Lafontaine—, readers of a pessimistic, but also ironic Latin-ness, which brings together and plays with humor, moralism and, of course, good prose.

Curiously, it was another ironic classicist, Juan José Arreola, who was one of Monterroso's first editors in Mexico, in that legendary series that Arreola published in the 1950s, "Los Presentes" (Those Present). It was there that in an eight-page notebook appeared the stories "Uno de cada tres" (One Out of Every Three) and "El centenario" (The Centenarian) (1953). Monterroso had previously published only another short *plaque* in the series "Los Epígrafes" (The Epigraphs) by Salvador Reyes Nevares: *El concierto y el eclipse* (The Concert and the Eclipse) (1952). Arreola's friendship in those years corresponds to a period in Monterroso's life that began his exile after the military uprisings in Guatemala during General Ubico's dictatorship. His arrival in 1944 brought him into contact with a generation of writers with whom he immediately shared readings and interests: "From the time I arrived in Mexico, I became part of a very active cultural milieu, that of the Mascarones School of Philosophy and Letters." It was a literary generation of which Monterroso, a Guatemalan born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, became a natural member, side by side with other young promising writers like Juan José Arreola, Juan Rulfo, Alí Chumacero, Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, Jaime Sabines, Ernesto Mejía Sánchez and Luis Cardoza y Aragón, among others.

Some time later, he would live a couple of years in exile in Chile, where he worked as Pablo Neruda's secretary in *La Gaceta de Chile* (The Chile Gazette). Upon his return to Mexico in 1956, he rejoined our country's cultural life working as a staff writer in the *Revista de la Universidad* (Univer-

sity Magazine) and as a translator at the Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing house. In 1959, his first book came out: *Obras completas y otros relatos* (Complete Works and Other Stories), followed by two works of fiction, *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* (The Black Sheep and Other Fables) (1969) and *Movimiento perpetuo* (Perpetual Motion) (1972). With the publication of *Lo demás es silencio* (The Rest Is Silence) (1978), a "novel" whose main character, Eduardo Torres, is the author's alter ego, Monterroso began a fruitful exploration of an undefined territory in terms of genre. It is a "literary space", as Blanchot would say, sown with narratives, micro-essays, epigrams, drawings, letters, pages of diaries, *greguerías*, maxims and aphorisms, that is "texts" (as he calls them) in which his extremely personal style consummates a vocation of transparency, exact, artless expression of a prose made to last. His later books, *Viaje al centro de la fábula* (Voyage to the Center of the Fable) (1981), *La palabra mágica* (The Magic Word) (1983) and *La letra e* (The Letter

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"E") (1987) would undoubtedly situate themselves in that same space.

Monterroso was small, generous, amiable, timid and ironic: a character out of one of his own fables and, therefore, a brother in letters of a Juan de Mairena or an Abel Martín. Also, his literature is part of a stream of Hispanic-American authors who made brevity a religion, an aesthetic creed. Those heterodox members of the Hispanic literary tradition, Julio Torri, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan José Arreola or Ramón Gómez de la Serna—to randomly mention just a few of the obligatory names—would all figure, of course, in that community. They all practiced a way of understanding literature not just as "a mirror of the world" (Stendhal), but barely and perhaps a personalized reflection, a fractured mirror. That is why their works are fragmentary, a-systematic, without that will to cohesion typical of nineteenth-century narrative. Perhaps that is why, I imagine, Augusto Monterroso wrote in his famous "Decalogue of the Writer," an ironic testimony of his literary practice, "Fertility: Today I feel good, a Balzac; I am finishing a line." ■■■