

LETTERS BECOME CLEAR WITH IMAGES

THE IMAGES IN LETTERS, LETTERS IN IMAGES COLLECTION

Alberto Vital*
Alfredo Barrios**

If we looked for two artistic disciplines that seem to clearly delimit their borders, we could point to photography and literature: one is visual, the other verbal. However, this perception might change if we go back to the history of writing, where images and letters have clearly been symbiotic: suffice it to think about the historic relationship between pictographs, hieroglyphics, or ideographs, which some cultures still use to this day. Some members of the avant-garde, like Guillaume Apollinaire, José Juan Tablada, or Vicente Huidobro, sought an iconic-textual reencounter through their calligrams, poems that form a drawing through the typographical lay-out of the words.

The image and literature have a long tradition of coexisting that ranges from the trope of the poetic image, whose aim is to cause a sensorial effect, whether visual, auditory, olfactory, or tactile, to the ekphrasis, a detailed description of figures, objects, places, characters, or situations, whether real (referential) or fictitious (notional). The image and literature are so closely linked that they can even share genres, such as in portraiture or stamps.



The image has gone through a long evolution, from sketching and the painting to photography and cinematography (a sequence of photographs). In the case of the art of photography, from the old daguerreotypes from the XIX century to digital photography—which we now carry with us in our cellular devices—, it has gone beyond mere documentation and has become comparable to works of literature. One good photograph not only tells a story, but also speaks to us about the era and the personality, the point of view and the beliefs system of whoever pressed the button. Julio Cortázar com-

* Member of the Hermeneutics Seminar of the UNAM Institute for Philological and Linguistic Research.

** Master of Latin American Letters at the Humanities Coordinating Department.



pared the short story with a photograph in his famous 1962 lecture in Havana, when he said that “a good photograph cuts out a fragment of reality, fixing certain limits, but in such a way that that cut acts as an explosion that completely opens up a much wider reality.”¹ And he finished with his vision of professional photographers: “I’ve always been surprised that they could express themselves just like a short-story writer could.”² Our literary history includes innumerable cases of very important writers who embraced photography as another form of expression: Juan Rulfo, J. M. Coetzee, or Cortázar himself are examples.

The “Imagen en letra: Letra en imagen” (Images in Letters, Letters in Images) project was created in the Coordination of Humanities Department thanks to support from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. It attempts to transcend the frontiers within art by encouraging an open dialogue among the more than 70 writers and 3 young photographers published in the first two volumes. It is an anthology that reveals, through literary (fictional) fragments and fragments of reality (photographs), the inflection points between the pens of Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, José Emilio Pacheco, Octavio Paz, Elena Garro, José Revueltas, Fernando del Paso,

Ricardo Garibay, or Roberto Bolaño and the cameras of Clara Araujo, Omar Reyes Solórzano, and José Alfredo Rodríguez.

The university bookstores already offer the first two volumes: 1968/50, made up of fragments of literature contextualized in Mexico’s 1968 student movement and photographs by Clara Araujo that look into what has happened in those places half a century later; and *De imágenes y relatos. Ciudad de México* (Of Images and Stories. Mexico City), which unravels the most diverse dramas played out in many corners of our country’s capital. These first two volumes are only the entryway for the future publications: iconographic reencounters in Mexico and poetry in different First Nations’ languages to commemorate the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

From 1968/50

“El descubridor” (The Golden Cockerel); text by Juan Rulfo. Photos by Clara Araujo.

From *De imágenes y relatos. Ciudad de México* (Of Images And Stories. Mexico City)

“Ensalada de pollos” (Chicken Salad), by José Tomás de Cuéllar. Photos by José Alfredo Rodríguez.

“Poética de la crónica” (Poetics of the Chronicle), by Vicente Quirarte. Photos by Omar Reyes. *Santa*, by Federico Gamboa. Photos by Clara Araujo.

Notes

¹ Julio Cortázar, “Algunos aspectos del cuento,” *Teorías del cuento I. Teorías de los cuentistas*, Lauro Zavala, comp. (Mexico City: UNAM, 1995), p. 309.

² *Ibid.*

THE GOLDEN COCKEREL (fragment)¹

by Juan Rulfo

Photos by Clara Araujo



Candelario Lepe, with his *tejano* hat always under his arm, took the sheet that was single-spaced and with two columns. He took his time reading the names listed there as if that had some meaning. After a good while he said, “These are just names.”

“All of them were in the Attorney General’s office yesterday. They might still be there, but I want you to do something before they move them to Lecumberri prison. You say that you’re good at this type of trouble.”

“What have they been accused of?”

“Of all sorts of things: disturbing the peace, resisting lawful authority, sedition, inciting disorder, and they’re saying something about an attempt to overthrow the government. All of that and more; you know how they can pile on offenses when they want to charge someone.”

¹ Juan Rulfo, “The Discoverer,” *The Golden Cockerel and Other Writings*, Douglas J. Weatherford, trans. and “Introduction,” (Dallas: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2017), pp. 185-189. Reprinted by permission of the Juan Rulfo Foundation.

CHICKEN SALAD

by José Tomás de Cuéllar

Photos by José Alfredo Rodríguez

Dark Chicken tried to get White Chicken to settle the matter, offering not to see Concha again; but White Chicken wouldn't budge and Arturo got more and more furious.

The altercation in the middle of the night drew the attention of the guards, who rushed toward the chickens. But the chickens, who had a sparrow hawk as a look-out, slipped out prettily, quietly taking Plateros Street.

Half an hour later, the four chickens were in the Arquitectos Neighborhood.¹



Finally, the chickens fulfilled their duty of the posthumous honors, and undoubtedly, this was when poor Arturo enjoyed the best reputation of his whole life.

One paper announced the news the next day, and then the others published it, some with this or that moral to their stories; the burial was in the afternoon in the San Fernando Cemetery, since the entire family agreed that it would have truly been a calamity if the body had been buried in Santa Paula, a very discredited and inelegant graveyard.²

¹ José Tomás de Cuéllar, *Ensalada de pollos y Baile y cochino...*, 3rd edition, Antonio Castro Real, ed. and "Prologue," Mexican Writers Collection 39 (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1977 [1946]), p. 142.

² *Ibid.*, p. 149.

“POÉTICA DE LA CRÓNICA” (POETICS OF THE CHRONICLE) (fragment)¹

by Vicente Quirarte

Photos by Omar Reyes

On June 21, 2015, the roof of a dwelling on Perú Street collapsed, resulting in the evacuation of all the tenants and the building’s closing. This took place in what is called Mexico City’s Historic Center. We natives prefer to use the plain, essential, well-loved noun “downtown.”

It’s the old house at #48 Allende Street, at the corner of Perú, in the heart of the Lagunilla Neighborhood, where I spent my childhood and early teens. The immediate sensation was that the enemy had taken a step forward: memory —and not the weight of the past— was under threat, the same way we’re deprived of other values in an increasingly violent, inhuman Mexico. . . .

The media called the building where I was born a *casona*, a big, old colonial-style house, when it stopped being a heritage in our individual memory and became news. *Casona* is a superlative that gives the noun “casa” (house) prestige. We instinctively call the space we’ve been given in our brief stay on the planet “my house.” And when we’re referring to it among the other members of the tribe, it is “the house.”

¹ Vicente Quirarte, “Poética de la crónica,” *Coordenadas 2050*, Cuadernos de la Coordinación de Humanidades, no. 12, October 2017 (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Coordinación de Humanidades), p. 5 (translated by Heather Dashner).



And she actually sat down on the second step of a half-spiral stone staircase few paces from the door. The concierge, humanized when faced with Santa's beauty, first smiled a simian smile, and then subjected her to a malicious interrogation. Was she going to stay with them in that house? Where had she been before?

"You're not from Mexico..."

"Yes, I am. I mean, not from the capital, but, yes, from very close-by. I'm from Chimalistac . . . below San Ángel," she added, by way of explanation. "You can go there on the train.... Do you know it?"

SANTA (fragment)¹

by Federico Gamboa

Photos by Clara Araujo



The concierge had only been to San Ángel for its annual fairs; she had sometimes accompanied the "*patrona*," her mistress, who was crazy for playing Spanish Monte. And, captivated by Santa, with her innocent, simple exterior, she approached until she rested an elbow on the railing of the staircase itself; almost sympathizing with her, seeing her there, inside the dive that gave her her living, a dive that in no time at all would devour that beauty and that young flesh that was surely unaware of all the horrors in store for her.

"Why are you going to throw yourself into that life?" **NM**

¹ Federico Gamboa, *Santa*, Biblioteca Universitaria de Bolsillo Collection (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006), p. 27 (translated by Heather Dashner).