

Checkmate to the Switchman¹

Homero Aridjis*



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Rubén Leyva, *The Chess Player*, 80 x 100 cm, 1999 (oil on canvas).

Death is now playing with the white pieces, according to Juan José Arreola's "Telemaquia."²

Often, a writer's best crafted character is himself, and seldom has this been truer in our literature than in the case of Juan José Arreola. To write about "the most outstanding

short-story writer to emerge in Mexico" (in the words of literary critic Emmanuel Carballo), I must resort to my own past, since Juan José Arreola forms a part of my literary youth.

I was about 18 years old when one Wednesday in the 1950s I went to the Mexican Writers' Center, on Río Volga Street, where Juan José Arreola was holding a literary workshop, perhaps the first in Mexico. I clearly remember my timid arrival at the little room that looked like a garage, frequent-

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ed by beautiful young Jewesses and fledgling writers. Juan Martínez, a poet from Guadalajara, was speaking, and everyone turned to look at me. The session had already begun and I had to stand. There were no empty seats.

Afterwards I explained to Arreola that I wanted to join his literary workshop, but when he heard about my lack of money, he hardly reacted at all: they charged for the workshop. Later I would find out that those who wrote the most were the ones who paid the least. Arreola asked someone to come to play chess and I asked if he played. Looking at me with sudden interest, he asked if I knew how to play the game of the ivory figures. I told him that in my adolescence I had played at the Carlos Torres Club in Morelia with Carlos Sansón, the state champion. He immediately invited me to his apartment on Río Elba Street. We left together. But, suspicious of my ability in the game, he sat me down at the chessboard with the writer Eduardo Lizalde. I won several games in a row and then Arreola played me. I beat him too, and since it was midnight, I left saying that we would see each other the following week. "What do you mean 'See you next week'? Next week is too far away for my re-match. See you tomorrow afternoon." I went back the next day and with re-match after re-match, we became friends in literature and in the game. Playing with Arreola was a pleasure because during the games he recited poetry or invented characters capable of unimaginable feats (particularly amorous feats, like that character Marcello da Papaviglia). "Don't get mixed up with Arreola; he's a bum and he's going to mess you up. Come with me to the cantina instead," warned Juan Rulfo at the time, with whom Maestro Arreola had interminable arguments about Zapotlán el Grande, his hometown.

Little by little, I became a friend of the family, of his wife Sara and his children Claudia, Fuensanta and Orso. The only time he ever reproached me was once in 1961 when I gave the erotic prose poem "La tumba de Filidor" (The Grave of Filidor) to his daughters Claudia and Fuensanta. He himself praised it, but he wanted it kept "just between us," since he was always courting some young girl. Watching his amorous exploits was a spectacle of poetic eloquence and comic situations. His agoraphobia and claustrophobia precipitated in him uncontrollable fears, making him avoid elevators; one night he went to the extreme of putting a friend under his bed of amorous surrender to come out and rescue him if he had a panic attack. Faced with the lady of his thoughts, this seducer with words

would suddenly vigorously attack because, as he put it very well in "El mapa de los objetos perdidos" (The Map of Lost Objects): "from time to time a lost woman appears on the map who mysteriously fits my modest resources."

On the basis of these chess and poetic encounters, I followed him from house to house on Río Elba, Río de la Plata and Río Guadalquivir Streets in what was the Cuauhtémoc neighborhood before Professor Hank González split it down the middle.³ And for some years I would be his neighbor when I lived on Río Elba with my wife Betty.

Times were hard for Arreola: he survived on credit from the corner grocer, what he published in *Cuadernos del Unicornio*, advances from other publishers and loans from friends. A great squanderer, he went out right away and spent his money on wine, exorbitantly-priced taxis and flamboyant vests (years later he would fall in love with Art Nouveau Gallé crystal vases). He used to arrive at his readings with a bottle of cognac in his jacket pocket.

Authors like Julio Cortázar celebrated him as a writer who drew us into the atmosphere of a piece in the first sentence.

These times of economic difficulties were also years of literary creativity, in which he wrote *Bestiario* (Bestiary) and *La feria* (The Fair). I can still see him sitting at the chess board polishing plots and phrases that little by little would turn into impeccably finished texts and perfect verbal machines. Sometimes he would laugh, savoring the findings of his own ingenuity, like in "Alarma para el año 2000" (Alarm for the Year 2000): "Careful. Every man is a bomb on the point of exploding." A phrase that could be dated 2001, referring to Muslim fundamentalists.

Or like in "Homenaje a Otto Weininger" (Homage to Otto Weininger), in which an impassioned male dog confesses: "In the light of the sun, mange is insufferable....Like a good romantic, my life was spent following a bitch."

Amidst day-to-day anxieties, his love for words was limitless. That was why at the end of the 1950s when he was appointed director of the Lake House in Chapultepec Park,⁴ the first thing he did was to form poetry groups. But his sense of humor was never far away: when the National Autonomous University of Mexico sent him dozens of graduates to keep them busy, he organized chess tournaments for them.



Enrique Villaseñor

The great taster of words.

And not only did he sit us down at the chessboard across from national masters and make us play simultaneous games with world champion Tigran Petrosian and runner-up Paul Keres, but —as his friend, actor Enrique Rocha tells us— Arreola himself dressed up in black and white, the colors of the chessboard, as a king or jester.

Being Arreola's friend had its price, and frequently the enemies of my friend were my enemies, too, since writers who have been dumped in the trash bin of literary history often pooh-poohed him despite his talent and despite authors like Julio Cortázar's celebrating him as a writer who from the first sentence drew us into the atmosphere of a piece. Jorge Luis Borges also recognized him in his own fashion. I still think that the five most important twentieth-century Spanish-language short-story writers are Quiroga, Borges, Cortázar, Rulfo and Arreola.

Playful man that he was, and indifferent to the block he suffered from, Arreola played chess and quoted his favorite authors from memory: Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Claudel, Ramón López Velarde, Pablo Neruda, Carlos Pellicer, Franz Kafka, Francisco de Quevedo. But evoking chess

players like Filidor, Ruy López, Lasker, Morphy, Capablanca, Alekhine, Botvinnik and Bobby Fischer, the games became a literary game, with verses by Ezra Pound, Fernando Pessoa and Borges, the latter with his "Ajedrez" (Chess): "In their grave corner, the players/ rule over the slow pieces. The board/ delays them until dawn in their severe/ surroundings in which two colors hate each other."

Because of this love of poetry, I was enormously happy to have included him as a poet in the anthology *Poesía en movimiento* (Poetry in Movement) (1966). And to have taken charge of selecting his works. Years before, in his *Confabulario total*, he had dedicated to me these generous words: "Homero: Watching the development of your talent as a poet has been one of my greatest joys."

The great taster of words and the best workshop leader Mexico has ever had has died. With his trade of writer he guided several literary generations, frequently at the cost of his own work. Though an illness kept him unconscious for three years (the last time I saw him, he did not recognize me), it was no longer necessary to speak with him. To find him alive, with his wild mass of hair and his sparkling eyes, you only had to go back in time, walk up the stairs of the building on Río Elba Street and knock on his door. When it opened, we would again find his anxieties, his loves and, above all, his word as a teacher. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Taken from the *Reforma* newspaper web site: http://www.reforma.com/ed_impresa/notas/011209/pagedit/textos/rhomeroaridjis.htm. (The title of this article alludes to a short story by Arreola called "El guardaguas" [The Switchman] about a railway employee who gives information to a passenger about train schedules. [Translator's Note.]) Reproduced by permission of the author.

² This is an allusion to the end of Arreola's short story "Telemaquia," which reads, "Man against man. Does anyone want to bet? Ladies and gentlemen, there is no salvation. In us, the game is being lost. The Devil is now playing with the white pieces." From *Bestiario*, collected in *Arreola, Narrativa completa* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1997). [Editor's Note.]

³ This refers to Mexico City Mayor Carlos Hank González' widening many of the city's streets. [Translator's Note.]

⁴ The Lake House is a National Autonomous University of Mexico cultural center. [Editor's Note.]

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