

# Andrés Henestrosa

## Attentive to Detail and Combative

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1906-2008

I don't know when I met Andrés Henestrosa, but my first memory of him goes back to 1952, when I was about to turn six. For a long time after the death of my father, Héctor Pérez Martínez, the people who had been his friends and continued to be my mother's would come to the house for Sunday dinner: Andrés

and Alfa, Antonio Castro Leal and Nena, Luis Cardoza y Aragón and Lía, Rafael Sánchez de Ocaña and Refugio, Fernando Benítez and Antonio Acevedo Escobedo, among others.<sup>1</sup> I remember that that day, Andrés gave me a book for my birthday. My first book with a dedication: *Los hombres que dispersó la danza* (The Men Who Dispersed the Dance). My mother read it to me little by little at bedtime before I went to sleep. Legends and myths that for me were stories that I liked and that would be hard to forget, like the mystery of the words in Zapotec, incomprehensible for me, that Andrés would

\* Mexican writer and winner of the Xavier Villaurrutia National Prize for Literature (1977) and the International Sor Juan Inés de la Cruz Prize (1998), given by Guadalajara's International Book Fair.

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suddenly say to me as though I could understand him. And since, after all, I was a child, I would say yes and yes and yes and yes to everything he said, and he would die laughing.

Andrés was sweet and affectionate all his life. He was a warm, simple person, but profound, like any man who has felt the wind of the countryside and knows the sound of water in streams or the perfume of recently cut grass or the glance of a woman. He always called me “mijita”, my little daughter, and, like nobody else, he could tell me stories about my father, and I loved to have him near me. I would sit beside him as though he were a relative, and he would cradle me in his arms when I was tired, and then my mother would pick me up and put me to bed.

Over the years, we never lost touch: sometimes I would meet him for breakfast at Sanborn’s or I

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would see him at his parties that enthralled me with the rhythm of the marimba, of the *sones* that his guests danced to and the colors of Alfa’s outfits or those of his friends or relatives. Cibeles was then a young girl with big eyes and a sweet expression like Andrés’s, though he never noticed my adolescence.

One day, many years later, I went to see him at his office downtown and took him my first published book, *La mañana debe seguir gris* (The Morning Must Continue to Be Gray). He received it as though it truly mattered to him that Héctor’s youngest daughter, the daughter of his dear friend, had become a writer. And when I joined the National Fine Arts Institute (INBA) National Coordinating Office for Literature, that he had headed up in 1952 when it was still the Literature Department, I called him to tell him that he should give

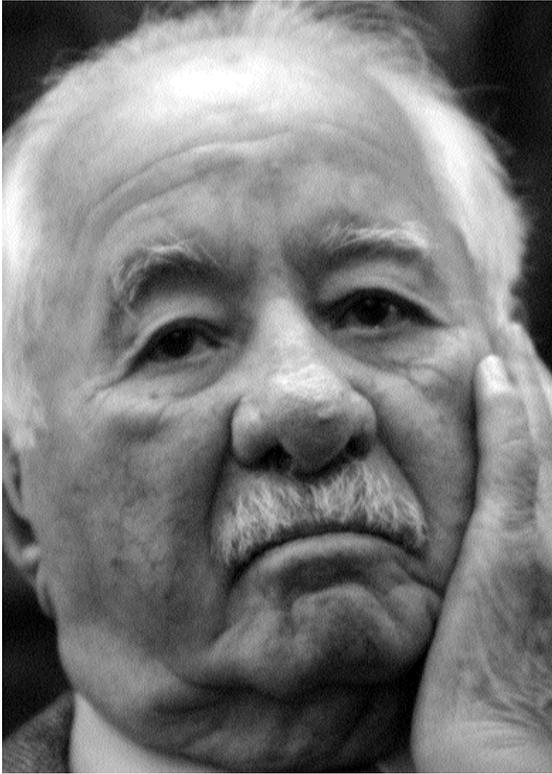
me his blessing so that I would do my job well. The first thing he said to me was that I should quit immediately and spend my time writing.

When I ran into him in a restaurant or café, he would introduce me to his friends telling an anecdote about his friendship with my father. He had met him in the National High School in 1924, and began seeing him more frequently in 1927, in the bibliography section of the Public Education Ministry’s Library Department, when it was headed up by Rafael Heliodoro Valle.

Andrés and my father started their careers in the world of letters together: both had been born outside the capital in 1906 and had more than a passing admiration for Benito Juárez. Both collaborated in *El libro y el pueblo* (Books and the People) and other magazines of the time. But it was not until 1929, when the *El Nacional* daily had recently been founded, that a life of camaraderie between them solidified definitively.

At *El Nacional*, their inseparable companions were Gustavo Ortiz Hernán, Luis Octavio Madero and Raúl Ortiz Ávila, with whom my father shared his column, called “Escaparate” (Showcase). All of them took their conversation from the newspaper’s copy room to the tables at the Broadway or the Café América because they were all men of letters and the topic never abandoned them. So, then Andrés became a José Vasconcelos supporter and began a journey that after 101 years is mythical: his relationship with José Vasconcelos and Antonieta Rivas Mercado, his stay in the United States, his foray into politics. Slight in one period and husky in another, Andrés walked easily among his people from Oaxaca and along the hallways of the Senate equally at ease.

Once, in a conversation, someone compared *Las manos de mamá* (My Mother’s Hands) by Nellie Campobello with *Retrato de mi madre* (Portrait of My Mother), both wonderful stories. And without any disrespect to Campobello, I rejected the comparison. Andrés’s book is the text of a writer in his prime, aware of his pen and his strength, contained, with literary instinct. It is perhaps the text that I have liked the best of all of his work, his classic, his zenith.



Only two weeks ago, Adán Cruz Bencomo gave me the volume that Miguel Ángel Porrúa published a few months ago with the collection of Andrés's legendary column, "Alacena de minucias" (Cupboard Full of Minutiae), and another work, *Henestrosa, nombre y renombre* (Henestrosa, Name and Renown), published by Diana on 2001, where he had put together a biography based on his direct experience of many years of friendship and devotion. I read them in one sitting without realizing how quickly I was doing it, and I was confounded by the effect reading his journalism had on me. It was as if I was discovering for the first time a voice that had already spoken to me a thousand times, charming me, hypnotizing me with its minutiae. I discovered in the whole a pleasant, clean, certain prose with extremely careful turns of the language, and, above all, I was amazed at the breadth of topics in his column.

As a whole, his "Cupboard Full of Minutiae" is a document that any student of letters or journalism or history should read to know not only something about the history of Mexican literature—with the advantage that this is not a textbook, but

an intelligent conversation about books, authors, styles, moments and periods—but also because it is a cultural history of Mexico's twentieth century. An unofficial history, free, playful, loving, curious. One learns and enjoys at the same time, taking pleasure in his sense of humor and acquiring a panorama of the country's development. But one also discovers this way Andrés's biography, his interests, tastes, concerns. It is there where he is most alive, where he does not hide behind his words, where there are no metaphors to hide behind.

He had lived so long that he was going to live forever. Frail, walking with difficulty in his last months, he still emanated internal strength, his goodness, his mischievous spirit, kind and intelligent. He watched 101 years parade before him with his inquisitive look, as a witness and a leading actor in our country's cultural life. A tree symbol-

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ized him: the *ahuehuete* conifer. Like it, Andrés was solid and long-lived. His pen had that strength that emanated from inside him and his long, long experience of life. I have just proven it to myself again rereading the collection of his column "Cupboard Full of Minutiae." *Retrato de mi madre* (Portrait of My Mother) and *Los hombres que dispersó la danza* (The Men Who Dispersed the Dance) are books that have accompanied and will accompany me always, like the arms that knew how to surround a little girl or that simply felt right at his side. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rafael Sánchez de Ocaña (Madrid, 1888-Mexico City, 1962) was a member of the 1898 generation, a lawyer, diplomat, doctor in philosophy, writer, journalist and professor at the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters.