Contemporary Literary Criticism

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Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

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Contents

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Juan José Arreola
1918-

Mexican short story writer, novelist, dramatist, and essayist.

The following entry presents an overview of Arreola's career through 1994.

INTRODUCTION

Arreola is considered one of Mexico's most important short story writers and is credited with dramatically influencing the direction of Mexican literature in the twentieth century. He is noted for his pioneering work in satire, surrealism, and absurdism, and for his break from the Mexican literary tradition of realism. While Arreola has incorporated the themes and styles of diverse types of literature into his works, he has also retained an element of regionalism, focusing on the experiences of average Mexicans. Arreola's narrative fiction and dramas have influenced Latin American writers since the 1950s, and he continues to nourish young writers with his writing workshops and his efforts to encourage the work of emerging authors.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Arreola was the fourth of fourteen children born to a deeply religious family in Zapotlan el Grande (now Ciudad Guzman), in west central Mexico. As a child he demonstrated an excellent memory and an interest in literature, but his family's financial circumstances forced him to end his formal schooling at the age of twelve to become a bookbinder's apprentice. He worked a series of jobs in Zapotlan before moving to Mexico City, where he enrolled in the Instituto de Bellas Artes to study acting in 1939. He began to focus on his writing during this time and formed acquaintances with other young Mexican writers. He collaborated with Juan Rulfo, a noted Mexican writer, in the creation of the short-lived literary journal *Pan* in the early 1940s. In 1943 Arreola published his first nationally recognized story, "Hizo el bien mientras vivio." His acting jobs provided him with an opportunity in 1945 to travel to France, where he was exposed to modern European literature and drama. Upon his return to Mexico, Arreola worked as an editor for the *Fondo de Cultura Económica* while continuing to write fiction. In 1949 he published his first collection of short stories, *Varia invención.* The work received little critical response; however, it was read by the literary circle of Mexico City and earned Arreola notice. In 1952 Arreola solidified his reputation as an emerging and important Mexican writer with the publication of *Confabulario.* The following year, Arreola's first play, *La hora de todos.* was produced. He has continued to write for the theater and has played an important role in Mexican television throughout his career.

MAJOR WORKS

Arreola first garnered attention for his two short story collections, *Varia invención* and *Confabulario.* In these stories, Arreola tackles a broad range of themes and subjects from urban life to historic events. The mysterious and absurd nature of life and the human condition is a main concern in many of his stories. Themes emerging in these early works include man's preoccupation with science and technology, the hopelessness of love, the deceptive nature of women, and the loss of poetic sensitivity. His most famous story, published in *Confabulario,* "El guardagujas" ("The Switchman"), involves an encounter between a foreign traveler and a elderly, mysterious railroad man, who, through his ramblings, provides an al-

legory about life. The story features several elements characteristic of Arreola's unique writing style: absurdism; reliance on magical realism; artistic and playful manipulation of language and form; heavy reliance on satirical humor; and a dark world view. In 1958 Arreola published a collection of animal allegories entitled *Punta de plata.* Building on the ancient literary tradition of attributing human characteristics to animals, Arreola modernized the genre through his use of satire, cynicism, and absurdity. He published his only novel, *La feria* (*The Fair*), in 1963. The work consists of many vignettes and fragmented stories which together relate the life cycle of a Mexican village. Although Arreola has been known for his incorporation of international literary styles and subjects into his work, this novel focuses solely on regional Mexican culture. Attempting to address questions about form and deconstructionalism, Arreola published *Palindroma* in 1971; it consists of numerous intellectual puzzles and games that challenge the reader carefully to consider the nature of content and language.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Arreola's first two collections of short stories have earned him considerable critical attention and praise throughout his career. Scholars credit Arreola with transforming the Mexican short story and introducing a new style and international literary elements to Mexican literature. Melvin Maddocks calls him "a brilliant, corrosive fabulist, very much of the modern mood." Some critics, however, feel that Arreola's writing can be uneven and that not all of his works are noteworthy. Maddocks, for example, argues that Arreola's straight satire is not equal to his writings that focus on the innate contradictions of life in a more indirect manner. Initial critical reaction to Arreola's novel *La feria* was largely negative, and the illusive nature of this and his other works has sparked heated scholarly debate over the intended meanings of his allegories. Despite these critiques, commentators praise Arreola's introduction of absurdism and existentialism into the Mexican literary tradition, which had been largely limited to realism. Reviewers note Arreola's unique style, his playful and skillful use of language, his melding of international and historic subjects, and his satirical talents. In addition, Arreola has earned recognition for his work in influencing and encouraging other writers. Seymour Menton describes him as "a true man of the twentieth century, an eclectic who at will can draw upon the best of all who have preceded him in order to create truly masterful works of art which in turn will be seized upon by others."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Varia invención (short stories) 1949
Cinco cuentos (short stories) 1951
Confabulario (short stories) 1952
La hora de todos: Juguete cómico en un acto (drama) 1953
Punta de plata (short stories) 1958; also published as *Bestiario,* 1958
**Confabulario total, 1941–1961* (short stories) 1962
La feria [*The Fair*] (novel) 1963
Palindroma (short stories and drama) 1971
Inventario (essays) 1976
Confabulario personal (short stories) 1979

*Includes *Varia invención, Confabulario,* and *Bestiario*; English translation published as *Confabulario and Other Inventions* in 1964.

CRITICISM

Melvin Maddocks (review date 16 July 1964)

SOURCE: "Mexican Fabulist at Play," in *Christian Science Monitor,* July 16, 1964, p. 5.

[*In the following review, Maddocks argues that while Arreola's satire is clever, the author is at his best when he grapples with the inherent contradictions of life.*]

The fable is the most charming form that moralizers have invented. Aesop—nourished by experience, stuffed with prudence, paunchy from common sense—would be quite intolerable in any other literary shape.

The fable is for extremists: for those, like Aesop, who are very sure of what they believe—and for those who are very unsure. In this century writers as different as Thurber and Kafka have developed a kind of dark parody of the fable, a sort of antifable. On its shallower levels it is cynical, bitter, given to facile inversions of conventional morality: the gay grasshoppers survive; it is the industrious ants who go under.

But at deeper levels the antifable can be a profound protest that sober, shrewd common sense is not enough. It is Hamlet's objection to Horatio, redirected to Polonius: "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The Mexican satirist Juan José Arreola, born in 1918, is a brilliant, corrosive fabulist, very much of the modern mood. The 97 pieces in this collection of 20 years of writing (1941–1961) are not all fables. There are letters, diaries, vignettes, sketches—even short stories. But the attitudes of the fabulist dominates. And what, in turn, dominates the attitude of the fabulist is the mocking determination to satirize what Aesop was celebrating: the self-sufficiency of human reason.

For example, pedants—that plodding lower order of the priests of reason—get rough treatment from Arreola. Enough of a scholar at least for purposes of parody, he beats them to a pulp with their own footnotes.

Then, to the basic element of absurdity, Arreola adds the equally unreasonable quality of cruelty. In his bestiary, humanized animals stalk one another with a predatory guile that systematically taunts the moral as well as the intellectual pretenses of rationalists.

All this is clever but obvious marksmanship.

Arreola becomes most impressive when he is driven beyond satire to confront the unreasonable contradictions, not of human nature, but of the universe itself. **"The Switchman,"** for instance, is a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress* as Kafka might have written it. For at the furthest limits of suffering—possessed by literal demons, wrestling literal angels—Arreola's people, and Arreola himself, are looking for a meaning behind the cruel absurdity. They are playing a game of brinkmanship with madness. What they fervently wait for, one becomes convinced, is the redeeming sign that will save them from the brink.

If Arreola will not allow reason to be the agent of salvation, neither will he permit love the job. A hardened anti-sentimentalist, he describes sexual attraction in cloying, contemptuous images ("Pyramus and Thisbe gnawing, one on each side, through a thick wall of jam").

Yet behind the toughness—the refusal to be taken in—Arreola is almost hungrily receptive for experience that might verify more hope than, at present, he can claim. Even now, out of the tart heart of disappointment, he can rather astonishingly produce phrases as alive with the promise of grace as this: "Carefully register the daily miracle."

It is as if the very choice of the fable form implies—even for a skeptic as determined as himself—wistful capacity for innocence. Three-quarters satirist, one-quarter mystic, Arreola is a gadfly who may one day use his wings as well as his sting.

Donald A. Yates (review date 1 August 1964)

SOURCE: "Caught in Our Logical Absurdities," in *Saturday Review,* Vol. XLVII, No. 31, August 1, 1964, p. 32.

[*Yates is an American educator, editor, translator, and critic, specializing in Spanish literature. In the following review, he appraises the English translation of Arreola's* Confabulario total, *noting that the work satirizes "man and his entanglements with logical absurdities."*]

In 1962, Juan José Arreola published in Mexico City his ***Confabulario total.*** It was, in a sense, his "Collected Works," since it brought together most of his short stories, including some of the earliest, which date back to 1941; his latest short sketches or fables (from which the book takes its title); his ***Bestiario*** of 1958, a satirical, anti-U.S. play, and all of his most recent prose pieces.

The present translation of ***Confabulario total,*** as the newest title in the Texas Pan American Series, confers a certain distinction on the forty-six-year-old author, for probably more of Arreola's over-all literary production is now available in English than of any other Spanish-American writer. The intellectual sophistication and imaginative virtuosity of this collection suggest that he is in many ways worthy of the honor.

The most polished and the most given to verbal and conceptual play of his "generation" of Mexican writers—a group that includes Agustín Yáñez, Juan Rulfo, and poet Octavio Paz—Arreola performs generally in the guise of satirist—a curious type of satirist whose professed pessimism is more cultivated than convincing. The piece that deals with the hyena in his bestiary is a descriptive gem: "The limner boggles and sketches only with difficulty the gross mastiff head, the hints of pig and degenerate tiger, the sloping line of the body, slippery, muscular, dwindling." But the bite of the final line penetrates only the flesh and not the bone: "He is perhaps the animal that has made the most converts among men." The observation amuses, as does the previous description of the boa as nothing more than a digestive process.

Arreola's target is man and his entanglements with logical absurdities; but the paradox inevitably interests him more than the plight. **"The Switchman,"** wherein the fantastic mismanagement and downright arbitrary deceptiveness of an imaginary national railroad system acquires, over the space of a few pages, the stature of a magnificent allegory of the human condition, is possibly his finest short story; it also happens to be one of his gaiest. The originality of Arreola's satire provokes surprise together with delight: he suggest that if all the rich men of the world were to pour their joint wealth into the construction of an inconceivably complicated and expensive machine designed to disintegrate a camel and zip him through the eye of a needle, then they would indeed most likely come to pass through the gates of Heaven.

Arreola shapes up as a better stylist than moralist: beauty of form often eclipses the substance of an idea. Consider the opening lines of his short story **"Liberty"**:

> Today I proclaimed the independence of my acts: Only a few unsatisfied desires and two or three wornout attitudes gathered together at this ceremony. A grandiose proposal that had offered to come sent its humble excuses at the last minute. All took place in a frightful silence.
>
> I believe the error consisted in its noisy proclamation: trumpets and bells, firecrackers, and drums. And to finish off, some ingenious pyrotechnical stunts concerning morality which burned only halfway through.

The excellence of the translation by George D. Schade is evident in these lines. He has done Arreola a humble and faithful service. Schade has taken certain liberties with the organization of the original ***Confabulario total,*** some of which he acknowledges. He has mysteriously shuffled a few of the stories about, but has wisely excluded the undistinguished play ***La hora de todos.***

The most disconcerting feature of this book, however, must be charged to Arreola himself, who arranged the contents of the Mexican edition in such a way that his most recent fiction comes first in the book and his earliest, least controlled, and least impressive work appears last.

The reader gets the odd impression that he is witnessing a gifted writer irrevocably and unaccountably losing his touch right before his eyes.

George D. Schade (essay date 1964)

SOURCE: An introduction to *Confabulario and Other Inventions* by Juan José Arreola, University of Texas Press, 1964, pp. vii-xi.

[*In the following excerpt, Schade surveys the collected pieces of Arreola's* Confabulario and Other Inventions, *noting the author's stylistic gifts and deft use of humor and satire.*]

Arreola, who has lived for many years in Mexico City, was born in Ciudad Guzmán in the state of Jalisco, Mexico in 1918. His stories first appeared in little magazines in Guadalajara in the early 1940's—one of them called *Pan* he edited with his friend Rulfo—and his first book, ***Varia Invención,*** came out in 1949. ***Confabulario*** followed in 1952, and in 1955 was published in a second edition together with ***Varia Invención*** in one volume. His bestiary appeared in 1958 under the title ***Punta de plata.*** In 1962 these books, together with the addition of a large number of new pieces, were all brought out under the title ***Confabulario total, 1941–61.***

This book is difficult to classify. Some of the pieces—like **"The Switchman," "The Crow Catcher," "Private Life"**—are clearly short stories in a modern mode, ranging widely in technique and style; a great many others, as the title would indicate, are fables; still others are sharp, satiric, one-page vignettes, and can hardly be called short stories. The tone and language vary considerably according to the subject. For example, in **"Baby H. P."** and **"Announcement"** Arreola parodies the commercial world of advertising, using jargonistic terms and breathless tone with excellent effect. But the same marvelous invention and wit, the same trenchant satire, and impish, impudent humor run throughout the collection.

In an age when many writers take themselves so seriously as to be solemn, it is refreshing to come across an author like Arreola, who laughs gleefully and wickedly at man—and by implication, at himself—puncturing all the foolishness he indulges in and cutting through the glaze of manners society sets so much store by.

Arreola is an accomplished satirist. He is very good at finding chinks in the armor, attacking his subjects in their most vulnerable spots and sometimes in places where they probably did not realize they were vulnerable. Bourgeois society and all its false values, rampaging twentieth-century materialism, the bomb, the cocktail party are just a few of his targets. With mordant descriptions, pungent attacks, or sly irony, he shows how silly mankind is, how outrageous man's behavior and antics are, how one is at the mercy of a world and society that more often seems to care for what is trivial and ephemeral than for what is essential. Arreola jabs at complacency and ruthlessly exposes pompous and hypocritical attitudes.

He takes a depressing view of most human relationships, and in a large number of his stories and satires he chips away at love and its illusions. Like the celebrated seventeenth-century Spanish satirist Quevedo, Arreola is particularly hard on women and marriage. According to him, women are given to treachery and adultery, and the impossibility of finding happiness in marriage is a recurring theme and echo in his work. Whatever the subject of his satire, Arreola most often achieves his effects by a deliberate jumbling of phantasy and reality, a mingling of the logical and the absurd, a blend of imaginative frivolity and Orwellian grimness.

Arreola's range includes not only the present, but much of the past. He has a special penchant for medieval times, attested in such pieces as **"The Song of Peronelle," "Sinesius of Rhodes,"** or **"Epitaph,"** a short, sympathetic biographical sketch of the poet Francois Villon. Erudite allusions from other literatures and history crop up often in his prose, as well as learned references to writers and their works in other fields—anthropology, psychology, science. And he seems astonishingly knowledgeable about a variety of esoteric subjects, for example, Roman and other ancient war machines, which he describes in an hilarious story called **"On Ballistics."**

One of the most ingratiating and delightful parts of Arreola's collected works is his ***Bestiario,*** consisting of twenty-six brief sketches. Here Arreola harkens back to that form which was so fashionable in medieval times with moralists and allegorizers, where certain virtues or characteristics were popularly attributed to certain beasts, real or imaginary. All of Arreola's beasts are real, their humanlike foibles and defects uncomfortably real too. Though Arreola's general outlook and some of the details in his bestiary will probably horrify the overly sentimental, still there are lyrical and poetic touches to offset to some degree the refined savagery of his satire.

Endowed with a resilient mind that skims swiftly from point to point, Arreola is also a gifted stylist. His imagery and language, except in some of the earliest stories, are

tart and fresh, his choice of words sometimes startling the reader, at other times stinging him, frequently delighting him. His writing is crisp with sentences that tend to be short and closely packed, yet there is no jerky or jolting effect; it is all perfectly under control, balanced and rhythmic. Anyone whose ear has become somewhat dulled by the monotone of much present-day literature will probably be charmed by the banquet in store for him in word and image in Arreola's prose.

Arreola has his quota of enthusiastic admirers; he has also his blinkered critics who upbraid him for turning his back on so-called Mexican themes. Of course, it is his enormous sophistication and universality that should attract readers of English, though he has done a few pieces very Mexican in theme and setting like **"Ballad"** and the impressive and touching story **"The Crow Catcher,"** which should have an exotic appeal for the foreign reader.

Obvious attractions abound in these satires, but there are also subtle delights often lurking below the surface. One will find, for example, several levels of meaning in a story like **"The Switchman,"** where the inadequacies of the Mexican railroad system are satirized on the obvious level; on a more symbolic level various interpretations of this story are possible.

If we wish to seek them, parallels to Arreola elsewhere are not difficult to find. **"Small Town Affair"** with its psychozoological tendency—a man assuming the attributes and horns of a bull—is somewhat reminiscent of Kafka's wretched character in "Metamorphosis" who awakens one morning to discover himself transformed into a gigantic insect. As the Mexican writer and critic Emmanuel Carballo has pointed out, several of Arreola's distinctive apocryphal biographies, including **"Nabonides," "Balthasar Gérard,"** and **"Sinesius of Rhodes,"** are inspired by Marcel Schwob's *Vies Imaginaires.* A contemporary author with whom Arreola is frequently compared is the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, with his playful, extraordinarily penetrating intellect, brilliant imagination, and phantasmagoric stories (he has written a bestiary too). Going further back in time, we can cite other similarities: the icy wit and coarse, bawdy, macabre humor of Quevedo, or the cleverness and cynicism of Voltaire. But though we detect reminiscences of one writer and echoes of another in Arreola's work, there is no doubt that he has a voice of his own, an inimitable style of utterance.

With such a large number of stories, fables, and sketches—almost one hundred—some unevenness is bound to occur, but in my opinion, the shadows recede before the lights. There are brilliant pieces in ***Confabulario*** and the other books which really dazzle. (pp. vii–xi)

Kessel Schwartz (essay date 1971)

SOURCE: "The New Novel, IV: Juan José Arreola," in *A New History of Spanish American Fiction, Volume II,* University of Miami Press, 1971, pp. 292-95.

[*Schwartz is an American educator, editor, and critic who has written extensively on Spanish literature. In the following excerpt, he discusses Arreola's focus on morality, absurdity, and irrationality in his short stories and his novel,* The Fair.]

Juan José Arreola, the fourth of fourteen children, was unable to attend school. He undertook a variety of physical and intellectual positions in a bank, on a newspaper, and in the theater, partly through the efforts of Louis Jouvet who met him in Mexico and took him to Paris. On his return he became a member of the publishing house Fondo de Cultura Económica, where he was able to continue the close association with books and reading which he loved so much. In 1952 he founded the publishing house Los Presentes, through which Carlos Fuentes first came to public attention, and he has continued to inspire young writers through his "Taller literario" and his review *Mester.* In 1961 he was named coordinator of literary publications for the Presidencia de la República. In the 1950s a polemic took place between his supporters and those of Rulfo about the relative merits of a national novel as opposed to the novel of special stylistic techniques. Because he eschewed an hermetic nationalism Arreola was considered heir to the traditions of the Contemporáneos and similar groups. Arreola found many new Mexican novelists to be vulgar and extreme and longed for a return to classic perfection. Less regional than Rulfo, Arreola, for all his universal and intellectual pretensions, superficially foreign to Rulfo's elemental problems of daily life, is as intensely Mexican in many ways. Primarily a short story writer, he has been called "el cuentista más rico, extraño y singular de los que escriben en nuestro idioma." Seymour Menton, a friend of Arreola, shows [in *Hispania,* 1959] how the latter moved from anguish, despair, and the struggle of lonely individuals to "the placid skepticism of magic realism." Menton also insists that Arreola, beyond any cosmopolitan intellectualism, exhibits a very definite "Mexican spirit whose roots go as far back as Lizardi."

In Arreola, who concentrates on the sexual, the ethical, and the aesthetic, one sees in varying degrees the interplay of moralism, universalism, and magical realism. He fancies himself a modern day moralist who is concerned with social justice, and he is not reluctant to expose the evils of Occidental materialism. More importantly, he carries on the tradition of fantasy in Mexican fiction established by Alfonso Reyes (an intimate friend) and others. Arreola stresses throughout the importance of formal beauty and his preoccupation with literary structures. In these he has tried to combine letters, diaries, commercials, biography, and the medieval fable.

Arreola's first collection of stories, ***Varia invención*** (1949), is varied, as the title implies, in both theme and techniques. All nonetheless seem to involve "sutiles casos de conciencia, intrincados problemas intelectuales. Le preocupa la teología, el infinito, en general los problemas metafísicos." Arreola identifies with famous historical characters and fuses reality and invention to give us animal

fables whose protagonists are either humanized animals or men with animal qualities. Of his twenty-three short stories comprising the section called "Bestiario," each has a name of the significant animal. Arreola reveals an unusual sense of humor, tinged at times with sarcasm and at others with pity for man's foibles. In 1952 his second collection, ***Confabulario,*** appeared. More obscure, existentialist, and fantastic than his first volume, with its magic realism and irrational universe it reminds one of Kafka in its reflection of the depersonalized and mechanized life of the twentieth century.

In 1955 the two books were combined to form one artistic unit, having a third edition, ***Confabulario total*** (1962), and still another in 1966, in whose prologue Arreola states: "De hoy en adelante me propongo ser un escritor asequible, y no sólo por el bajo precio que ahora tengo en el mercado, sino por el profundo cambio que se opera en mi espíritu y en mi voluntad estilística." Aware of the absurdity of life, he tells us about lonely individuals, examines Golden Age literature and the function of creative artists, and gives us a general criticism of American society. Typical of one phase of his work is **"El silencio de Dios,"** where a man must choose between good and evil and tries to establish a dialogue with God in order to relieve himself of the doubts, anguish, and despair he feels at his own life and those of fellow human beings. Choosing good over evil naught availeth, as God tells him to accept what life brings. Man cannot understand God's designs and must face the future with hope. Arreola continues variations on his evangelical themes in stories like **"En verdad os digo,"** where rich men may enter heaven, as camels, through the use of modern electronic and atomic science and so find themselves able to pass through the eye of a needle. Other stories involve everything from adultery to science fiction. Arreola illuminates his stories with suggestive imagery and makes one wonder at the subtleties of the human mind and at organic existence.

Arreola's first and to date only novel, ***La feria*** (1963), winner of the Villaurrutia prize, is made up of bits and pieces as varied as his stories, parts of which he inserts into his longer narrative. He uses monologues, flashback, counterpoint, a diary form, and dreams. Biblical texts, memoirs, social commentary, history, and experiences from his youth, intermingled with allegory, fable, apologues, sociology, philosophy, the absurd, and the logical, are superimposed on the life stories of people in an imaginary town of southern Jalisco. Compassionately yet skeptically, Arreola views man's insistence on moving towards his own self-destruction. The true protagonist seems to be the town of Zapotlán itself. Its multiple dwellers give us an accurate picture of the religious and social life, the humdrum of daily living, and the semianonymous inhabitants, who number thirty thousand more or less. The Mexican Revolution has neither helped nor changed their languid and stagnant town, left largely unmoved also by Indian attempts to recover their land and by the cristero revolts. The town's economy is based on corn. Through a shoemaker and would-be writer and agriculturist, we learn about the sowing, cultivation, and reaping involved. Arreola includes a number of legends about corn, combining the telluric theme with those of religion and sex, the latter done as a series of confessions and involving onanism, the reading of pornographic literature for sexual excitement, adultery, and homosexuality. In man-woman relationships the former seems superior, but both need love and suffer from sensual frustrations and the loss of ideals. Poor Concha de Fierro, a prostitute, cannot lose her virginity in spite of her best efforts, until the ragged bullfighter, Pedro Corrales, makes good use of his sword. During an earthquake the frightened town residents indulge in a general confession which overburdens the priest's capacity.

Religion and humor seem to be two of the constants in Arreola's novel. The town's patron saint is Saint Joseph, brought there in 1745 by a mysterious muleteer. Every year a fiesta is celebrated in his honor, and this year several prelates will crown Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and poor Saint Joseph, who for all his importance, is outranked in his own town. The town lives almost by its saint's calendar rather than by historical event. The fair, a transitory event as man in the world is a transitory being, is burned to the ground at the end, and so man will disappear also. Arreola seems obsessed by man's inexplicable need to pervert, corrupt, and destroy, not only others but also himself. Man has become a victim of his own rhetoric and incredible inventions. He foolishly substitutes words and machines for harmony, love, and reinforced human values—the only hope for survival in an increasingly dehumanized and absurd world in which man has refused to accept responsibility for his own self-destructive tendencies. (pp. 292–95)

Theda M. Herz (essay date Spring 1975)

SOURCE: "Continuity in Evolution: Juan José Arreola as Dramatist," in *Latin American Theatre Review,* Spring, 1975, pp. 15-24.

[*In the following essay, Herz traces Arreola's contributions to the dramatic form.*]

Despite his renown as a writer of fiction, Juan José Arreola's predilection for the theatre spans a period of approximately forty years. He first studied drama with Rodolfo Usigli and Xavier Villaurrutia, performing as an actor under the latter's direction. From 1945 to 1946 he held a scholarship which permitted him to travel to Paris where he acted in the *Comédie Française.* During this formative period, he came under the influence of two innovative director-producers, Louis Jouvet and Jean-Louis Barrault.[1] At least tangentially Arreola has also ventured into the theory of stagecraft with his translation of ***Vie de l'art théatral, des origines a nos jours*** (1932).[2] Although between 1939 and 1940 he composed three one-act farces (***La sombra de la sombra, Rojo y negro,*** and ***Tierras de***

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