## INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years or so Mexican literature has been greatly enriched by the works of a group of extremely talented writers both in poetry and in prose. Octavio Paz (1914), Agustín Yáñez (1904), Juan Rulfo (1918), and Rosario Castellanos (1925) have already been translated into English and other languages and their work has been greeted with critical acclaim in Europe and the United States as well as in Mexico and other countries of the Spanish-speaking world. One of the most original and interesting writers among this generation is undoubtedly Juan José Arreola (1918), whose collected short stories, satiric sketches, bestiary, and sundry inventions are gathered together here under the general title *Confabulario*, which means a collection of fables.

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, 1941-1961.

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 a 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 "Bestiary," 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 psycho-zoological 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 Ouevedo,

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.

In this translation I have followed the text and arrangement of the 1962 Confabulario Total edition with several exceptions. I decided to exclude from this volume a one-act play, La Hora de Todos, first published in 1954, which seems to me ineffectual, greatly inferior to Arreola's prose fiction, and out of place in this collection. I made only one other cut, very reluctantly in this case, a short sketch in prose modeled on the French ballade with its three stanzas, each ending in a refrain, and an envoi. This ballade defied all efforts at coherent and smooth translation, the key phrase of the refrain being used in a series of plays on words through the text. A long and ponderous explanatory footnote would have been necessary, and this I rejected as unthinkable in Arreola. I have also taken the liberty of reversing the order of the first two parts in Confabulario Total, putting "The Bestiary" before "Prosody," for "The Bestiary" is a much more impressive opener. I do not think Arreola will find fault with this, as he himself shuffles many pieces about from Varia Invención to Confabulario and vice versa in the different editions of these books.

G.D.S.

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