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Roberto Arlt's Alter-travelogue against the Backdrop of Rio de Janeiro

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Lo que ocurre . . . es que los que viajan maldicen el día que se pusieron en camino. Se aburren espantosamente, y en su interior les importa un pepino los paisajes que pasan ante sus ojos. El día que regresan—y aquí interviene la imaginación—les aseguran a todos los que quieren escucharlos que ‘no hay cosa más linda que viajar—Roberto Arlt, “El viajero-baúl”¹

Roberto Arlt, the popular fiction writer, playwright, and journalist of the 1920s and 30s particularly well known during his lifetime by a large Argentine readership for the journalistic sketches titled *aguafuertes* that he published in *El Mundo*, stands out as a unique writer of a frantic nature known for his unconventional observations.² Challenges in analyzing his

¹ *El Mundo* [Buenos Aires] 7 June 1930: 6. All of the *aguafuertes* cited in this article originally appeared in *El Mundo* in Arlt's column on page 6. Therefore, the name of the newspaper and the page number will not be repeated in subsequent references.

² In the physical space of the newspaper and the aesthetic space that was created between journalism and literature in nineteenth-century Latin America

works arise due not only to the fragmentation and contradictions that characterize his writing style, but also to the fact that he published over 1,800 *aguafuertes* between 1928 and his death in 1942, the overwhelming majority of which was never re-edited and published in book form. Within the body of largely forgotten *aguafuertes* are more than sixty that he published between 8 March 1930 and 7 June 1930 dealing either directly or indirectly with the first trip he took outside his native Argentina to Montevideo and Rio de Janeiro. The fact that literary critics have routinely overlooked these *aguafuertes* is somewhat understandable given that only a few have been included in the many *aguafuerte* compilations published since 1933.³ But this oversight is especially striking given that Arlt made subsequent trips under similar pretences, i.e., he was sent on trips by *El Mundo* as a correspondent in order to write and publish his observations, and critics have since paid far more attention to the journalistic sketches and short stories that came out of his experiences in such places as

emerged the *crónica* (*crônica* in Brazilian Portuguese). Writers throughout Latin America adopted the French *chronique* and adapted it to the context of their rapidly modernizing societies. Arlt's *aguafuertes* ('etchings' in English) are very much a part of the hybrid genre *crónica*, and while he occasionally referred to his journalistic pieces by this name (as well as others including *artículos*, *informaciones*, *recuerdos*, *viñetas*, *notas*, and, during his 1930 trip, *notas de viaje* and *notas de a bordo*), he normally used the title *aguafuertes*. For this reason, I will use *aguafuertes* in this analysis.

³ Many collections of Arlt's *aguafuertes* have been published in book form, beginning with *Aguafuertes porteñas* in 1933 (Victoria). Later anthologies of Arlt's *aguafuertes* include: *Aguafuertes porteñas* (Futuro 1950), *Aguafuertes porteñas* (Losada, several editions between 1958 and 2002); *Nuevas aguafuertes porteñas* (Hachette 1960); *Entre crotos y sabihondos* (Edicom 1969); *Cronicón de sí mismo* (Edicom 1969); *Las muchachas de Buenos Aires* (Edicom 1969); *Nuevas aguafuertes* (Losada 1975); *Aguafuertes porteñas* (Hyspamérica 1986); *Aguafuertes porteñas: Buenos Aires, vida cotidiana* (Alianza 1993); *Aguafuertes porteñas: cultura y política* (Losada 1994); *Aguafuertes porteñas* (Corregidor 1995); *Notas sobre el cinematógrafo* (Simurg 1997); *Aguafuertes gallegas* (Ameghino 1997); *En el país del viento. Viaje a la Patagonia* (Simurg 1997); *Aguafuertes gallegas y asturianas* (Losada 1999); *Escuela de delincuencia: Aguafuertes* (Ediciones de la Banda Oriental 2000); and *Aguafuertes vascas* (Simurg 2005). There is, however, no complete collection of all of Arlt's *aguafuertes*.

From 8 March 1930 to 7 June 1930 Arlt published seventy *aguafuertes*, over sixty of which have to do in one way or another with his trip. Of these, only five have been included in the above-mentioned compilations: "Una carta olvidada" (*Cronicón de sí mismo*) and "¿Para qué?," "Espérenme, que llegaré en aeroplano," "Diario del que va a viajar en aeroplano," and "Proposiciones comerciales" (*Nuevas aguafuertes porteñas* and *Cronicón de sí mismo*).

Patagonia, Spain, and Morocco.⁴ A mix of naivety, frustration, and insight characterizes Arlt during his first international experience in 1930. A superficial reading of the *aguafuertes* of this period easily leads to conclusions about how he was an inexperienced traveler all too quick to latch on to familiar things while incapable, or worse, uninterested in discovering new things. A closer analysis however reveals a unique perspective from within the culturally neocolonial Latin American predicament of the early twentieth century. Arlt offers his readers many insightful observations that in their entirety serve as a critique of travel writing and of writers who traveled. This critique serves as the starting point from which Arlt would experiment with the genre of the travelogue and develop something of an anti-travelogue.

Arlt announces to his readers on 8 March 1930 that he is going to travel: “Me rajo, queridos lectores. Me rajo del diario...mejor dicho, de Buenos Aires. Me rajo para el Uruguay, para Brasil, para las Guayanas, para Colombia, me rajo.”⁵ In the end he would spend approximately two weeks in Montevideo and two months in Rio de Janeiro and return to Argentina without reaching the Guayanas or Colombia.⁶ Referring to Arlt’s “truncado

⁴ See, for example, Sylvia Saïtta, *El escritor en el bosque de ladrillos: una biografía de Roberto Arlt* and Rita Gnutzmann, *Roberto Arlt: innovación y compromiso*.

⁵ “Con el pie en el estribo,” 8 March 1930.

⁶ The following time line follows the dates of publication and therefore is approximate. Due to the time it took to mail them to *El Mundo* from abroad, the publication date is usually a few days later than the date in which the *aguafuertes* were written. By 7 June Arlt had been back in Buenos Aires for at least a week, but the date is included here as the final date in this series due to the content of the corresponding *aguafuerte*:

8 March: Arlt announces to his readers that he is going to travel. He builds up the hype in his *aguafuertes* in the following days leading up to his departure.

13 March: Arlt is on a boat in route to Montevideo.

15 March: Arlt writes from Montevideo.

31 March—1 April: Arlt is on a ship heading to Rio. Here the time delay is obvious due to an editor's note that appears in *El Mundo* on 29 March explaining that Arlt has arrived in Rio de Janeiro.

2 April: Arlt writes from Rio de Janeiro.

21 May: While still in Rio de Janeiro, Arlt announces to his readers that he has won the Tercer Premio Municipal de Literatura for his novel *Los siete locos* and will consequently receive 2,000 pesos and a ticket back to Buenos Aires via seaplane, effectively ending his South American adventure (“Espéreme, que llegaré en aeroplano”).

viaje” through Hispanic America, Daniel Scroggins concludes: “El proyecto para ensanchar sus horizontes mediante mayor contacto con otros países del continente no tuvo éxito” (76). It is true that Arlt did not reach all the countries he anticipated visiting. Furthermore, it is true that he expressed on many occasions his frustrations with travel in general and with being bored in Rio. The number of destinations on the original itinerary that a traveler reaches and the degree to which he or she is content while traveling are possible criteria for measuring a trip’s success or failure. But Arlt had different objectives. On the cutting edge of a new generation of Argentina writers, Arlt not only set out to formally reject a well-established kind of travel and travel literature very much in vogue at the time, he further sought to develop a new kind of travelogue. As Sylvia Saítta notes, “a partir de los años veinte, con la aparición de un periodismo masivo y comercial, son otros los escritores que viajan. El mercado cultural de masas reformula los vínculos entre los escritores y su público, y altera las relaciones entre estos escritores asalariados y los propietarios de los medios de producción” (181-2). Arlt represents a new kind of professionalized Argentine writer more than willing to break with the literary traditions of the previous generation. In travel literature, Arlt was part of the early twentieth-century trend of moving from the realist and often didactic text “to a more impressionistic style with the interest focused as much on the travellers’ responses or consciousness as their travels” (Carr 74). But he was also part of an even larger context of a neocolonial cultural relationship between European models and Latin American ones.

Mary Louise Pratt sees Latin American travel writing of the first decades of the twentieth century as indicative of the neocolonial relationship between the center and the periphery. She defines the neocolonial status as a predicament where, on the one hand, modernity serves as an equalizer amongst nations but, at the same time, nation states are limited politically, economically, and culturally in charting their own

1-2 June: Arlt writes about his experience returning to Buenos Aires via seaplane. Again, Arlt’s readers are made aware of the time delay on 31 May when an editor’s note appears in *El Mundo* explaining that Arlt is back in Buenos Aires.

7 June: Arlt writes about travel, reiterating his belief that most people hate traveling but feel obliged to say otherwise.

course, resulting in an outward flow of the fruits of productivity: “To be modern is to subscribe to the values of the metropole and seek to fulfill them. To be neocolonial is to be unable to do so, yet unable to exit the system and chart a separate course” (Pratt 226). Arlt struggles with this neocolonial predicament in which there is no existing alternative conceptual framework in which to work. He attempts to chart a new course without being sure exactly how that new course will turn out. His intention is to approach the very idea of travel in a new way, confident that the resulting literary and journalistic account will stand in stark contrast to the typical travel memoirs written by the more privileged Argentine writers (those with money to travel), who continued in the tradition of the previous generation’s travel accounts, such as Miguel Cané’s *En viaje* (1884). While Arlt’s innovative spirit can be credited for a good amount of his success as a writer, it might also be seen as somewhat of a disadvantage in that he begins his travel-writing endeavor from the margins of literary genres without being able to fully articulate where he wants to end up. His main objective, it seems, is to challenge the literary canon on every front.

There is a wide range of terms commonly used to describe writing about travel including: *travel book*, *travel narrative*, *travel memoir*, *travelogue*, *travel journal*, *travel writing*, and *travel literature*. Such terms are somewhat ambiguous, especially when used interchangeably. There is little consensus as to which term is the most appropriate to talk about a given piece of writing. Similarly, there is some debate as to whether there exists a travel genre and, if so, what exactly it includes. Are descriptive texts such as guidebooks and maps to be included? Is it necessary to speak of dichotomies, whether real or false, between subjective and objective forms or between fictional and non-fictional? There is also the difficulty in distinguishing one genre from another, although Arlt was adept at navigating in and out of literary genres without necessarily subscribing to any one in particular. Arlt’s success in the hybrid genre of the *crónica (aguafuertes)* is a testimony to this adaptability. Similar to the *crónica*, and indeed historically related, travel writing comes in many forms including diaries, letters, memoirs, prose, poetry, historical texts, biographies and autobiographies. Travel books, according to Paul Fussell,

“are a subspecies of memoir in which autobiographical narrative arises from the speaker’s encounter with distant or unfamiliar data and in which the narrative—unlike that in a novel or romance—claims literal validity by constant reference to actuality” (203). According to this definition, the travel book is part of a larger genre. Others, such as Jonathan Raban, see travel writing as a space in which different genres converge (253-4). Borrowing from the French and German distinctions between the genre *travel book* or *travelogue* on the one hand, and *travel literature* as a general thematic category on the other, Jan Borm suggests a similar distinction be made in English between “the *travel book* or *travelogue* as a predominantly (and presupposedly) non-fictional genre, and *travel writing* or *travel literature* . . . as an overall heading for texts whose main theme is travel” (19). This critic sees the *travel book* or *travelogue* as a literary genre that mixes various forms of writing and crosses over into other genres. He defines this genre as “any narrative characterized by a non-fiction dominant that relates (almost always) in the first person a journey or journeys that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming or presupposing that author, narrator and principal character are but one or identical” (17). Here I will borrow Borm’s definition of the travelogue as a hybrid genre. In the case of Roberto Arlt’s travel *aguafuertes*, we are dealing with a super hybrid genre of the travelogue written as *aguafuertes* or *crónicas*.

Arlt published his *aguafuertes* in the first person and based his prose on personal experiences and observations. While there is undoubtedly an essential element of fiction in all that Arlt writes, he records his impressions in such a way that his readers do not detect much of a distance between Arlt the writer and Arlt the narrator and are thus led to believe that most of what Arlt writes is factual inasmuch as it is narrated according to the way in which the writer experienced it. This allows Arlt to include himself as the protagonist of his *aguafuertes* in order to generate interest and suspense amongst his readers in anticipation of his upcoming trip. On more than one occasion, Arlt cites himself talking to his director (Carlo Muzio Sáenz Peña): “Quiero tener carta blanca para decir la verdad. Para mí, la importancia de la verdad de un corresponsal, cuyo diario le

permita expresar las cosas sin embages, es abrir puertas para el turismo, es facilitar la comprensión y el acercamiento de los pueblos que viven lejos, a muchas horas de velocidad”.⁷

Arlt cannot believe how lucky he is to be able to travel. *El Mundo* has given him authorization to travel and a budget to boot:

No llevo guías ni planos con cotas de nivel, ni libros informativos, ni geografías, ni estadísticas, ni listas de personaje famosos. Únicamente llevo, como introductor magnífico para el vivir, dos trajes, uno para codearme con la gente decente, otro roto y sucio, el mejor pasaporte para poder introducirme en el mundo subterráneo de las ciudades que tienen barrios exóticos.⁸

He continues to marvel at the wonders that await him on his upcoming trip in “Frente al viaje”, where he contemplates the notion of travel: “Un viaje es, ¿no les parece a ustedes que un viaje es como ir apresuradamente al encuentro del destino que no tiene forma y que guarda misterios que no sabemos en qué consisten?”⁹ Still in Buenos Aires preparing to embark on his great adventure, Arlt continues to build up the hype for his readers: “Debe haber rincones maravillosos en las distancias, psicologías estupendas, tipos que todavía no los ha imaginado ningún cerebro.”¹⁰

Over a week into his trip, Arlt is only mildly impressed with Montevideo but still very optimistic about the journey that lies ahead in Brazil. While clearly conscious about his relationship to the marketplace, one of obvious dependency considering the importance of readership as well as the limitations of space imposed by the newspaper for his column, he concludes that he is as free as a bird given the relative independence his wages provide and the relative lack of censorship he faces:

Ando viajando por los países de América para ver y decir cosas que otros no han podido o no han querido decir ni ver. No persigo subsidios ni me trabajo elogios ni pretendo homenajes ni banquetes. Ando solo: si hablo con alguien es para penetrar en la psicología de las gentes. Como en fondines y me albero en pensiones rantifusas. Vivo y me muevo con la platita que me paga el diario en que escribo, donde se me ha autorizado a decir lo que siento. Soy, por lo tanto, libre como un pájaro.¹¹

⁷ “Informaciones de viaje” 19 March 1930.

⁸ “Con el pie en el estribo” 8 March 1930.

⁹ 9 March 1930.

¹⁰ “Au revoir” 10 March 1930.

¹¹ “Hablemos con sinceridad” 22 March 1930.

Arlt's initial optimism seems to be in stark contrast to his later pessimism. First he is optimistic that his experience will be enjoyable and, more importantly, worthwhile in rethinking established notions of travel. Once he gets to Rio he is initially delighted in all that he sees. This is especially evident in his descriptions of the people and of the food. "Mujeres, cuerpos turgentes envueltos en tules; tules de color lila velando mujeres de color cobre, de color bronce, de color nácar, de color oro," he writes during his first couple of days in Rio.¹² He goes on to describe the food with humorous exaggerations: "Y la crema de abacate [palta]. Antes de tomarla hay que hacerse la señal de la cruz, debe haberla inventado el demonio, para producir sueños voluptuosos."¹³ But the novelty of being in a new place quickly wears off and Arlt is left to ponder what exactly he is doing in a foreign place about which he knows next to nothing. While he is used to observing human behavior in any number of contexts in Buenos Aires and talking to people of all walks of life, he is now forced to reckon with the fact that he is obviously an outsider looking in and that being a foreigner in Rio presents him with new obstacles that he must face in order to interact with people. It almost seems that the initial optimism gives way to a dislike of traveling, leading Arlt to conclude by the end of his trip that one might as well stay home, for traveling is not all it is cracked up to be. "¿Por qué será que las cosas nuevas interesan el primer día y luego se acabó el interés?," he asked himself and his readers in the last days of his trip.¹⁴ Saítta notes this supposed change in Arlt's temperament during his trip: "A medida que avanza su viaje, Arlt abandona su pose de viajero y de corresponsal extranjero e intenta captar un temperamento tan diferente del argentino. Por eso, abomina de los monumentos, desdeña las excursiones pensadas para los turistas y se niega a contemplar el paisaje" (185).

Here it is important to note that the true starting point for Arlt's anti-travelogue is not the moment he informs his readers he will be traveling abroad for the first time. Rather, it begins at some previous point in time when Arlt began to reject the typical travelogue in Argentina written

¹² "Ya estamos en Río de Janeiro" 2 April 1930.

¹³ "De todo un poco" 4 April 1930.

¹⁴ "Diario del que va a viajar en aeroplano" 29 May 1930.

by aspiring bourgeois writers, a rejection he was articulating in his *aguafuertes* at least by 1928:

[L]os que viajan por Europa necesitan hacernos saber a nosotros los argentinos que quedamos aquí, la impresión maravillosa que les produjo los acueductos, y las ruinas, de las que sólo quedan unos escombros con los que se podría fabricar pedregullo sin que por ello nada perdiera el arte ni la humanidad. A ese modo de gansear lo llaman hacer poesía y qué sé yo cuántas otras incoherencias más. Y lo curioso es esto: todos esos sujetos que vienen con la novela de las ruinas de Italia, son unos farsantes que se quieren dar bombo de artistas y de haber estado en Italia y en las ruinas porque ello es muy elegante.¹⁵

Arlt openly expressed this kind of antagonism towards most of his contemporary Argentine writers before ever leaving Argentina. In “Por qué no se vende el libro argentino,” he insisted: “No hay crítica, no hay espíritu nacional de literatura, no hay un fin social o artístico determinado, no hay nada.”¹⁶ In particular, writers who closely followed in the footsteps of previous writers without offering anything new repulsed Arlt. Nowhere was this so clear as in the case of Argentine writers who traveled to the usual European tourist destinations only to return with an air of superiority and a need to validate themselves by way of a written account of their grand adventures. Even worse than haughty English writers who publish books about their travels that no one will ever read are, according to Arlt in “Argentinos en Europa”, the Argentine writers that go one step further by publishing their memoirs in newspapers.¹⁷ In the same *aguafuerte* Arlt gives concrete examples of such writers and accuses them of seeking fame, “y eso explica el libro de [Martín S.] Noel y las correspondencias francamente estúpidas del señor [Arturo] Lagorio, poeta y vicecónsul en Italia, o las memorias sobre Palestina del señor [Max] Rhode, o las de [Eduardo] Carrasquilla Mallarino tan malas como las de Rhode, las de Lagorio y las de Manuel Gálvez.” Arlt saw such writers as frivolous, pretentious, and in many ways alienated from *porteño* society. He reiterated his particular dislike for Gálvez on a number of occasions including in an interview in 1929: “¿Gálvez? ¡Yo no sé hacia donde camina!

¹⁵ “Argentinos en Europa” 18 October 1928.

¹⁶ 31 October 1928.

¹⁷ 18 October 1928.

Me da la sensación de ser un escritor que no tiene sobre qué escribir” (Romero 78).

As Scroggins explains: “Las correspondencias que nacen de un viaje a París, a Londres, a Roma o a otra ciudad monumental llegan a ser casi una obligación de los jóvenes aristócratas argentinos del primer cuarto de siglo para dar con ellas testimonio del imprescindible viaje a Europa” (81). Arlt, of course, was not the only writer to react negatively to the travel tradition of writers from privileged backgrounds, nor was Argentina unique in producing this kind of travel-related social snobbery. Just a few years prior to Arlt’s trip, Aldous Huxley had something similar to say about travel:

The fact is that very few travellers really like travelling. If they go to the trouble and expense of travelling, it is not so much from curiosity, for fun, or because they like to see things beautiful and strange, as out of a kind of snobbery. People travel for the same reason that they collect works of art: because the best people do it. To have been to certain spots on the earth’s surface is socially correct; and having been there, one is superior to those who have not. (3-4)

In the interest of creating an anti-travelogue, Arlt does everything in his power to first identify what he despises in travel writing and secondly to separate himself from this tradition. He attempts to dispel at least three myths regarding traditional travel accounts: 1) the act of traveling, such as being on a ship in the open sea, is a wonderful experience; 2) there is a correlation between the popularity of common tourist destinations and their aesthetic or social value to society; and 3) having been to key destinations abroad grants the traveler with a certain amount of knowledge and insight that can validate their future travel memoirs.

The very act of travel, contrary to most written accounts, is for Arlt most unpleasant. In “Se lo regalo al océano”, en route to Rio de Janeiro on a ship from Uruguay, he says: “Da realmente bronca pensar que hay reos que hacen literatura, y que le pasan a la gente la novela de las bellezas del océano. . . . A esos muleros debían obligarles a beber el mar para que terminaran de hacerle creer macanas a la gente.”¹⁸ He elaborates on how

¹⁸ April 1 1930.

boring and tedious it is to travel and narrates in great detail the horrors of seasickness:

Usted se ahoga. Sale vacilando del camarote, sube al segundo puente, se deja caer moribundo en una hamaca: y el viento fuerte apenas le enjuga la frente. Se le seca adentro su organismo. La oscilación horizontal continúa trabajando con náuseas, y aunque cierre los ojos y no quiera comprobar el ángulo de inclinación de la pasarela de la nave, contemplando la recta del confín, es inútil.

Arlt challenges the notion that aspiring Argentine writers must take an obligatory trip to a European destination such as Rome or Paris by going instead to Rio de Janeiro. Once in Rio, he criticizes the common tourist destinations, such as the local zoo. He comically narrates the horror he feels in seeing the conditions in which the animals live and the fear he has that two caged lions might escape from a cage with a perimeter of only four by five meters and a height of just three meters, and lacking a roof or any other overhead barrier:

Y no vayan a creer que son leones de juguete. No. Son de verdad, de carne y hueso. La reja que los separa de nosotros, los cristianos, tiene menos grosor que la de nuestras verjas para jardines domésticos. Insisto: cualquier día, con esas malas bestias, se va a armar un lío de dios es Cristo; y más de un negro va a pagar los platos rotos. Lo que es yo, no vuelvo más por el Zoológico. Me bastó una visita.¹⁹

As we have seen, Arlt's criticism of the writers responsible for the travelogues begins not with his first trip out of the country but rather long before the trip was even conceived. This sort of criticism continues throughout his trip. In "¿Para qué?" he proudly demonstrates an anti-intellectual streak in order to criticize well-known authors.²⁰ A reader sends him a letter asking why he has no intention of talking to writers and intellectuals in Uruguay and Brazil. Arlt makes his answer public by including it in this *aguafuerte*: "¿A quién interesan los escritores? Uno se sabe de memoria lo que le dirán: Elogios convencionales sobre Fulano y Mengano." He goes on to relate his experience of being interviewed by the carioca newspaper *Diário da Noite*. Someone encouraged him to suggest in the interview that the director of *El Mundo* wanted him to visit the country

¹⁹ "Llamémoslo Jardín Zoológico" 29 April 1930.

²⁰ 9 April 1930.

of the revered Brazilian writer Castro Alves. Referring to this incident in his *aguafuerte*, Arlt retorts:

Yo no sé quién es Castro Alves. Ignoro si merece ser venerado o no, pues, lo que conozco de él (no conozco absolutamente nada) no me permite establecerlo. Sin embargo, los habitantes de Río, al leer el reportaje, habrán dicho:

–He aquí que los argentinos conocen la fama y gloria de Castro Alves.

Unapologetically anti-intellectual, Arlt humorously concludes: “Castro Alves me es menos conocido que los cien mil García de la guía telefónica.” Arlt does not want to meet any of the many contacts that people have suggested to him, preferring instead spontaneous adventures: “Quiero andar por todas partes y como se me dé la gana.”²¹

A well-known travel novel of the same period is Mário de Andrade's parodic *Macunaíma: o herói sem nenhum caráter* (1928). Referring to the preface of this novel, in which de Andrade humorously claims he does not know if he is really Brazilian, Pratt draws attention to the conceptual framework within which de Andrade has to work: “He is invoking the neocolonial cultural predicament. If all he has to work with are inherited European discourses, he can only create something authentically Brazilian by using those discourses in consciously inauthentic ways” (232). Arlt's travelogue is far different from *Macunaíma*, but an important commonality is that Arlt, like de Andrade, misappropriates a metropolitan discourse of travel. By proudly confessing a total lack of knowledge of Castro Alves, Arlt refuses to partake in the tradition of acknowledging the greatness of writers in the host destination. Ironically, Arlt seems to have no knowledge of de Andrade either, or of any other contemporary Brazilian author no matter how traditional or vanguardist. But this too can be attributed to some extent to the neocolonial predicament. Whereas European travel writers of the same period rarely expressed the need for prior knowledge of the places they visited, Latin American travel writers were generally expected to have such knowledge. Arlt defiantly challenges this notion by openly confessing his ignorance. He is not only ignorant of Brazilian writers but of Brazil's history too: “Estatuas, iglesias antiguas y todos los cachivaches del otro

²¹ “Y me voy en martes” 11 March 1930.

siglo, me dejan perfectamente indiferente. No me interesan. Creo que no le interesan a ningún argentino. Aburren, seamos sinceros.”²²

By rethinking the very notion of travel without even having much travel experience to speak of, much less an alternative framework divorced from European discourses, Arlt struggles to separate himself from the vestiges of the traditions he rejects. Fernando Rosenberg notes how both Arlt and de Andrade shared this type of struggle:

In writing down their travel experiences—Mário de Andrade as an idiosyncratic ethnologist, Roberto Arlt as a journalist—these writers found themselves confronted with situations where mapping the practices that constituted a shifting notion of culture was a condition for articulating their own thoughts. These texts perform a history of a present replete with past discourses, overshadowed practices, expelled subjects, contending spaces, and outmoded artifacts, all of which fail to add up to a narrative of territorial integration, historical overcoming, or a promising future. (108)

One more or less concrete obstacle that Arlt faces in developing a new kind of travelogue by way of his Brazilian adventure is the Portuguese language. There is little doubt that he is intrigued by it and finds it pleasant: “El idioma portugués, hay que oirla conversar a una menina [chica], es de lo más delicioso que puede concebirse. Es un parlamento hecho para boca de mujer, nada más.”²³ Yet, while he has been granted a work space in the editing room of the *carioca* newspaper *O Jornal*, which also afforded him access to Brazilian journalists, he incorporates words and short citations in Portuguese without any considerations whatsoever for correct spelling or grammatical accuracy. (It is also curious how the editors of *El Mundo* allowed the printing of Arlt’s linguistically egregious errors.) In “Porque vivo en un hotel”, Arlt writes about staying with a *porteño* friend and a Portuguese journalist in a cheap hotel in Rio when some men show up unexpectedly to take away the bed and the two mattresses on the floor.²⁴ Arlt is sleeping when the men wake him up and say to him: “Sua excelencia poe dexar a leito (sic).” (It turns out that his *porteño* friend sold everything in the room including the bed out from under him.) Arlt’s poor Portuguese citations appear in a number of *aguafuertes* and often include a

²² “No me hablen de Antigüedades” 6 May 1930.

²³ “De todo un poco” 4 April 1930.

²⁴ 16 April 1930.

mix of Spanish and Portuguese: “¿Cómo le va a la menina?,” he asks a sickly girl he meets in his hotel.²⁵ On a few occasions his Portuguese is so bad that it is unclear whether he is serious or joking: “[H]oy día 18 de mayo, domingo en Buenos Aires y ‘Prima Feira’ [sic] aquí en Brasil.”²⁶

While he seems perfectly capable of understanding enough Portuguese in order to interact with people in most casual circumstances, there are times when the language difference appears to be much more of a barrier, such as in “Redacción de O Jornal,” where Arlt makes it clear that he has direct contact with journalists in Rio: “Todas las noches vengo a escribir mi nota a la redacción del diario ‘O Jornal’.”²⁷ In this peculiar *aguafuerte* about journalism, Arlt hangs out at *O Jornal* and writes while observing Brazilian journalists. But his participation in their conversations is clearly limited due to the language barrier: “Yo oigo conversar pero como no entiendo ni medio, miro; sonrío a los que me sonríen y luego sigo en la máquina. Laburo.”

One cannot help but wonder if there are not other factors such as race and class that add additional levels of separation between Arlt and the *cariocas* on top of the language difference. That is not to suggest that Arlt is racist. His infatuation with the miscegenation so visible in Rio would seem to suggest just the opposite. Observing a young couple he asks himself: “¿Cuántas razas se mezclan en estos dos cuerpos? No sé. Lo único que veo es que son magníficos.”²⁸ Nor does Arlt discriminate against the poor, although it could be argued that he does discriminate against the rich. Yet, while he commonly demonstrates an affinity with the poor and working classes, he appears reluctant to get too close to the extreme poverty of Rio de Janeiro. Keeping his distance from the *favelas*, he claims that nothing really happens in Rio, meaning he is not aware of much criminal activity. He sees it as a safe and virtuous city, which ultimately amounts to boredom. “¿Qué hago yo en esta ciudad virtuosa, quieren decirme?,” he asks. “Porque aquí no hay ladrones. ¿Se dan cuenta? No hay misteriosos. No hay ‘pequeros.’ No hay tratantes de blancas. No hay la mejor policía del

²⁵ “¡Pobre brasilerita!” 4 May 1930.

²⁶ “Diario del que va a viajar en aeroplano” 29 May 1930.

²⁷ 13 May 1930.

²⁸ “Algo sobre urbanidad popular” 10 April 1930.

mundo. ¿Qué hago yo en esta ciudad, tranquila, honesta y confiada?”²⁹ Accounts of travel in travelogues are, according to Michael Cronin, “active interpreters of the cultures through which they travel” (23). Cronin sees this as a basic characteristic that sets the travelogue apart from travel logs. Applying this to Arlt, one could argue that either he is a poor interpreter of Brazilian culture or, more convincingly, that he challenges every defining characteristic of the travelogue, even if it means taking this defiant stance to its illogical extreme.

Arlt is fascinated by how hard the Afro-Brazilians work: “Bajo un sol que derrite las piedras, uno de esos soles que lo hacen sudar a Ud. como un filtro, y que aturdirían a un lagarto, el negro brasileño, descalzo, sobre las veredas candentes, acarrea adoquines, conduce bultos, sube escaleras cargado de fardos tremendos, maneja el pico, la pala...”³⁰ He sees they are exploited and yet he limits his descriptions of this exploitation to a few lines. More striking is how he keeps his distance, rarely if ever talking directly to the black laborers and going so far as to describe them as if they were of a different species:

“¿Con quiénes hablan? ¿Tendrán un ‘totem’ que el blanco no puede nunca conocer? ¿Distinguirán en la noche el espectro de sus antepasados? ¿O es que recuerdan los tiempos antiguos cuando, felices como las grandes bestias, vivían libres y desnudos en los bosques, persiguiendo los simios y domando serpientes?” This is one of the few times that Arlt slips into something reminiscent of the search for the pure, untouched savage of exotic lands apparent in many contemporary Europeans travel books such as D.H. Lawrence’s *Mornings in Mexico* (1927). Regardless of exactly how Arlt sees the laborers, he ultimately behaves more like a nineteenth-century Baudelairean *flâneur*, observing from a distance rather than interacting directly with the people he observes as does the Roberto Arlt of the *aguafuertes porteños*.

In “Os mininos (sic),” Arlt writes about how he has been all over Rio in search of graffiti to decipher and, to his great surprise, there is none to be found:

²⁹ “Río de Janeiro en un día domingo” 22 April 1930.

³⁰ “Trabajar como negro” 12 April 1930.

He merodeado por escuelas del suburbio, por los barrios obreros, por las callejuelas oscuras y sucias como getthos; he andado por los morros y los recovecos más absurdos, por los rancheríos, donde viven negros que más que hombres parecen babuinos; por el arrabal, por los barrios burgueses, por las 'ruas' [calles] empinadas de las islas, y en ninguna parte he encontrado esos notables 'grafitos' que nos muestran un señor con cuernos saliendo por encima de su sombrero, o realizando actos más graves para la imaginación infantil. Tampoco he encontrado aquellas inscripciones que enternecerían a un arqueólogo y que rezan más o menos así: 'Fulano es un tal por cual,' o si no 'yo soy un . . . ' y que están destinadas a insultar al que las lee.³¹

He claims to have been all over the city, even to the *morros* (*favelas*), but here he is talking about graffiti, i.e., visual observations rather than interaction with the people. The people with whom he actually interacts tend to be other immigrants or people he encounters in and around his hotel.

Arlt's curiosity takes him to some unspecified poor neighborhoods. On the one hand, he is horrified at what he sees: "Fui a los barrios obreros y he recibido una sensación de terror. Durante varios días caminé con esa visión en los ojos."³² Yet, surprisingly, he severely limits his descriptions of the terrible things he claims to have seen in these neighborhoods. Instead, he writes about how he generally prefers a representation to reality: "Esto es lo que me ha desilusionado de viajar. No daría un cobre por todos los paisajes de la India. Prefiero ver una buena fotografía que ver el natural. El natural, a veces, está en un mal momento, y la fotografía se saca cuando el natural está en su 'mejor momento'."³³

This reluctance to see what is just around the corner is sometimes explicit, such as in "Fiesta de la abolición de la esclavitud", where Arlt eats lunch with a Catalan acquaintance that informs Arlt that May 13 is the day Brazil will celebrate the abolition of slavery.³⁴ Arlt's acquaintance goes on to tell him that it has been just 42 years since abolition (1888-1930). Arlt is surprised that it was so recent that people were legally enslaved in Brazil and is clearly unashamed of his ignorance of history: "¡Pero no es posible! Ud. debe estar equivocado. No será en el año 1788..." Arlt leaves in

³¹ 16 May 1930.

³² "Sólo escribo sobre lo que veo" 30 April 1930.

³³ "No me hablen de Antigüedades" 6 May 1930.

³⁴ 14 May 1930.

disbelief, verifies the slave stories with others, and then meets up with the Catalonian later on. They chat more and the Catalonian encourages him to go to the docks to ask the older black workers about this. But Arlt stops short of approaching any of the workers, claiming that he is afraid of being overwhelmed with such an intense dose of reality and preferring instead to read a literary representation of history: “Y todavía no me he resuelto a reportear a un ex esclavo. No sé. Me da una sensación de terror entrar al ‘País del Miedo y del Castigo.’ Lo que me han contado me parecen historias de novelas . . . prefiero creer en lo que escribió Alencar temblando de indignación, es una historia sucedida en un país de la fantasía. Creo que es mejor.”

Arlt serves as a sort of cultural transmitter and mediator between the people he interacts with and his reading public. A lot of the information he relates takes what Gorica Majstorovic refers to as “cultural detour” as it is passed on from one person to another, eventually reaching Arlt’s *porteño* audience (111). Arlt is always aware of his relationship to the marketplace. His lifeline in Brazil, and even in Argentina to a large extent, is the newspaper that pays his salary. Arlt’s livelihood depends on the newspaper’s general readership and on evidence of Arlt bringing readers and, consequently, consumers to the newspaper. Rather than deny this writer/marketplace relationship, Arlt uses it as a recurring topic in his *aguafuertes*: “Nosotros, los periodistas, nos parecemos a ciertas mujeres: tenemos que sonreírle al público, aunque nos llore el corazón.”³⁵

Although Arlt never forgets his relationship to the marketplace, his claim that he keeps smiling for his public is greatly exaggerated. It seems at times that he is almost intentionally setting himself up for disappointment in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. If traveling does not amount to a worthwhile activity, it would follow that Arlt was right about the need to rethink the very genre of the travelogue. In “Ya lejos”, published on 15 March 1930 while he is still in Montevideo preparing for the next leg of his trip to Brazil, he articulates the inherent loneliness in traveling unaccompanied to unknown places: “La única verdad es ésta. Donde uno vaya se sentirá solo. Si usted cree que los viajes pueden influir en su ánimo

³⁵ “En la caverna de un compatriota” 5 April 1930.

y convertirlo en otro, está equivocado. Por el contrario; viajar quiere decir ponerse en contacto con gente desconocida que no tendrá ningún interés en conocer a usted ni usted a ellos.” Arlt continues to feel terribly lonely in Rio de Janeiro, although he usually attributes this to how boring Rio is rather to the difficulties he has had in integrating himself into a new place in such a short period of time:

No se escolaza, no se bebe, no se va al teatro, porque de los tres teatros uno está cerrado, el otro sin compañía y el tercero en refacción. No se pierde el tiempo en el café, porque en los cafés no hay tolerancia para los vagos. No se juega, porque todos los cabarets, donde había timba, fueron clausurados. No se pierde el tiempo con malas mujeres, porque las malas mujeres dispararon aburridas de tanta moralidad. No se lee, porque los libros cuestan caros, y con darle una ojeada a los periódicos el asunto está liquidado.³⁶

Pratt sees Alejo Carpentier's famous essay “De lo real maravilloso americano” as a purposely dysfunctional travel account “that marks the neocolonial difference between the American traveler and his European counterpart” (227). While Carpentier is often criticized for being *europeizante*, argues Pratt, “Europe's codes of travel description do not govern it. He is *europeizante* in an undeniably American and, it would seem, neocolonial way” (227). Arlt's Brazilian travelogue differs significantly from that of Carpentier. To begin, it is less poetic and far more fragmented. It is also significant that it is not an account of rediscovery upon returning. Instead of gaining insight upon returning to Argentina, Arlt, in a way, never really left in 1930. Physically, he was out of Argentina for close to three months. But mentally he seems to have never left Buenos Aires, and his impressions of the places he sees and the people he meets have far more to do with his own condition and ultimately say very little about Rio de Janeiro of 1930. Gnutzmann notes that Arlt's characters, particularly those of his novels including Silvio (*El juguete rabioso*), Erdosain (*Los siete locos* and *Los lanzallamas*), and Balder (*El amor brujo*), typically do not stray very far even from their homes, let alone from Buenos Aires: “El único viaje que realmente importa en la obra arltiana es el mental que permite el desplazamiento espiritual mientras que el cuerpo

³⁶ “Treinta y seis millones!” 8 May 1930.

permanece en un lugar fijo o se mueve en un espacio de pocos kilómetros” (“Viaje real” 127). Instead of physically traveling from one place to another, Arlt’s characters take mental trips. Ironically, Arlt does just the opposite in real life: he takes a physical trip to Rio de Janeiro but his mind more or less stays in Buenos Aires.

Like Carpentier, Arlt could easily be criticized for being *europelizante*. He could hardly be expected to be anything else, for all his cultural references were European: his parents were European immigrants; *porteño* society in general was overwhelmingly European in its racial composition and its institutional structure; Arlt’s literary references were largely Russian, French, and Spanish; and his livelihood depended on a newspaper industry that was born in Europe. Though Arlt was unable to abandon the entire framework of European-based travel discourse, he was able to subvert it in interesting ways. To begin, he did not travel to the usual European destinations or to Europe at all in 1930, but rather to Brazil. Secondly, when comparing *carrioca* society to *porteño* society, he lauds European ideas on the one hand: “Creo que todavía predominan, con incuestionables ventajas para la colectividad, las ideas europeas,” but comes to the surprising conclusion that it is Brazil and not Argentina that is more European: “Se me ocurre que de todos los países de nuestra América, el Brasil es el menos americano, por ser, precisamente, el más europeo.”³⁷ Brazilians are more European than their Latin American neighbors, explains Arlt, due to their education: “Tienen una educación tradicional, son educados, no en la apariencia o en la forma, sino que tienen el alma educada. Son más corteses que nosotros...Es como si de pronto usted, acostumbrado a dormir sobre adoquines, reciba para acostarse un colchón.”

Roberto Arlt represents some of the most important new trends of Latin American literature of the 1920s and 30s. Coming from the lower middle class and making a living as a professional, i.e., wage-earning writer, Arlt’s works serve as a bridge between seemingly opposing forces such as: literature and journalism; fiction and other forms of writing considered objective; and European and American literature. In the context

³⁷ “Hablemos de cultura” 6 April 1930.

of travel literature, he is clearly part of a new generation of writers who would travel for the sake of writing and, at the same time, further the trend away from the realist school and towards a far more impressionistic style. At the same time, his work defies any rigid classification. Intentionally writing from what he referred to the margins of literature, he is marginal even to the vanguardism of his contemporaries. Unconcerned with the specific consequences that his artistic efforts might have, he never hesitated in following his creative impulses, leaving future generations to ponder their importance. By looking at these *aguafuertes* as fragments of an intentionally disjointed travelogue, it is possible to imagine Arlt as the director of a play in which he is also the protagonist, who is forced to come to a Dostoyevskian conclusion about the futility of effort when one is doomed from the start to fail. But, in terms of an anti-travelogue, this failure is Arlt's success.

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