

## Roberto Arlt and the Readers of Romance

*En este ensayo examino el papel de las lectoras en la obra del escritor argentino Roberto Arlt. Planteo que, en el texto arltiano, el estado conflictuado y encarnado del público lector se cristaliza en la figura femenina (o feminizada) de la lectora de folletines. A través de esta figura, el texto arltiano revela y critica la omnipresencia del discurso sentimental normativo, narrando las maneras según las cuales este discurso circula, impacta, y queda absorbido por los cuerpos de sus públicos lectores. Mientras la novela permite a Arlt articular abiertamente su crítica feroz del discurso sentimental, los espacios mediáticos del teatro y del periódico le obligan a emplear estrategias más oblicuas. Demuestro que, en el caso de muchos sus aguafuertes, en su cuento "Eugenio Delmonte y los 1300 novios" y en su obra de teatro Trescientos millones, Arlt interpola a sus lectoras como lectoras de folletines, a la vez que perfora el borde entre la obra y el medio en lo cual esta obra aparece, así fomentando en sus lectoras una mayor consciencia de la influencia de los medios masivos en la vida cotidiana.*

Palabras clave: Roberto Arlt, lectora, encarnación, folletines, medios masivos

*This essay examines the role of female readership in the work of the Argentine writer Roberto Arlt. I argue that the conflicted and embodied status of the reading public in Arlt's work is crystallized in the female (or feminized) reader of romances. Through this figure, the Arltian text reveals the pervasiveness of normative sentimental discourse, and narrates how this discourse circulates, impacts, and is absorbed by the bodies of its readers. These critiques emerge quite clearly in Arlt's novels, where the author enjoys greater freedom of expression. However, his periodical publications and theater necessarily employ a more oblique critical strategy. Focusing on his aguafuertes, the short story "Eugenio Delmonte y los 1300 novios" and the play Trescientos millones, I show how Arlt interpolates his readers as readers of romance while also enacting a rupture in the boundary between the work and the medium in which it appears, encouraging the reader's awareness of the influence of those media in her daily life.*

Keywords: Roberto Arlt, female reader, embodiment, romance literature, mass media

No other Latin American author of his time managed to so completely bridge (or implode) the Great Divide between masterpiece and mass appeal, yet the specter of the reading public remained for him perpetually and irreducibly problematic. The works of the Argentine writer Roberto Arlt exhibit the self-awareness, formal complexity, colloquial language, and Expressionist tendencies proper to the literature of the historical avant-gardes. They evidence a sweepingly critical political stance that exceeds the limits of any one political camp. And they were read by hundreds of thousands of readers in Buenos Aires from the late 1920s until Arlt's death in 1942 at the age of forty-two. This is all the more impressive in an author who never finished elementary school, and whose work abounds not only in slang and vulgarities, but also in basic spelling errors. To the charge that he writes "badly," in 1931 Arlt retorted that he could easily name many people who write correctly "y a quienes únicamente leen correctos miembros de sus familias" (*Obra completa* 309). Likewise, in his short story "El escritor fracasado," Arlt satirizes, at length and in detail, the local intelligentsia's ignorance of that "eterna bestia," the "gran público," whose interest they are so patently unable to pique (*El jorobadito* 53). He was the first to recognize that it was not his skill with language but rather his command of an audience that set him apart from those "escritores fracasados" and legitimized him as a writer. The public made him an author.

At the same time, this public was for Arlt a constant source of anxiety. This anxiety at times expresses itself in the explosive violence that characterizes his style. In the manifesto-like preface to his 1931 novel *Los lanzallamas*, he affirms: "Crearemos nuestra literatura, no conversando continuamente de literatura, sino escribiendo en orgullosa soledad libros que encierran la violencia de un 'cross' a la mandíbula" (*Obra completa* 310). Much critical attention has been paid to Arlt's boxing metaphor; far less to the phrases that anticipate it, or to the ambiguous protagonism that the creating agent *nosotros* attributes to Arlt's whole cultural field before the act of writing is isolated within the confines of an *orgullosa soledad*. The initial welcoming plurality of a shared creative agency dissolves into an impersonal gerund that aspires towards the singular, wanting only to be left alone. The agency of reader and author proves both fundamental and unstable as the sentence – and the vocation of literature – resolves itself violently as a punch in the (reader's?) face.

Arlt's exemplary declaration also contains within its grammatical structure the starting points for two different ways of viewing his relationship with his public. On the one hand, the *orgullosa soledad*, with its Modernist emphasis on the individual artist, posits pride and dignity as a property of solitude as if they were guaranteed by it, or as if solitude were a

synonym for artistic independence. The more solitary dimension of Arlt emerges most forcefully in Carlos Correa's *Arlt literato* (1996). Correa reads the Arltian text in the key of Existentialism, emphasizing its expressions of anguish and absurdity, its constructions of despair and isolation. Describing the setting of Arlt's 1933 short story "Las fieras," for example, he writes: "en esta región tenebrosa no hay solidaridad ni tarea común que hacer; lo inhumano es un *estado* y sólo queda ocasionalmente, además del encarnizarse en el rebajamiento solitario, la contemplación a veces fascinada de las figuras de la infrahumanidad" (29). On the other hand, in the context of a prologue to a novel, the affirmation that "crearemos nuestra literatura" implies solidarity, both with the reader and with other writers. It invokes a sense of a collective process, and a sense of shared social reality not yet captured by other writers. It also distances the author from a "they," i.e., aristocratic writers who do not write about or for "us," or can afford to indulge in non-productive, purely theoretical debates about literature. Such a gesture posits Arlt as a man of the people – the sort of Arlt that, for example, Raúl Larra claimed for the Communist Party in his 1950 biography *Roberto Arlt, el torturado*. However, both Arlt's political inclinations and his acute social awareness emerge more forcefully in Beatriz Sarlo's *Una modernidad periférica* (1988) and her essays on Arlt, as well as the significant archival contributions of Sylvia Sáitta in her biography of Arlt, *El escritor en el bosque de ladrillos* (2000), and in her organization and republications of Arlt's *Aguafuertes*. These studies locate Arlt's literary contribution in his vivid portrayal of a rapidly changing social reality in a decisive historical moment: daily life among the marginalized and the working classes in 1920s and 30s Buenos Aires.

This tension between solidarity with his readership and his *orgullosa soledad* hints at the author's concern with ownership – his decision to write the prologue to his own novel certainly implies a desire for the kind of full creative control seldom afforded to a newspaper columnist. And so while the authors Borges and Other Borges might acknowledge in resigned stereo that their best work "ya no es de nadie, ni siquiera del otro, sino del lenguaje o la tradición," Arlt's dependency on his reading public was a constant reminder that his work belonged neither to him, nor to the author Roberto Arlt, but, in the words of *Los lanzallamas'* protagonist Erdosain, to some local housewife "desventrada y gorda, leyendo entre flato y flato alguna novela que le ha prestado la carbonera de la esquina" (*Obra completa* 461). The reading public legitimized him, but it could still disgust him.

This rather grotesque image can in fact be connected to some of the drastic social changes taking place across Latin America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In "Culturas críticas: la extensión de un campo," Graciela Montaldo explores the significance of the arrival of that cultural subject known as the

masses (referred to in her article as *la masa* or *el gran público*; the latter term also appears in Arlt's "El escritor fracasado," where it is used interchangeably with *la multitud*). This troublesome group, she writes, represents for the lettered elite *the* great problem of modern Latin American culture. Especially since the publication of Ángel Rama's *La ciudad letrada* (1983), the relationship between the two groups has informed a tremendous amount of scholarship on Latin American culture (39). And one of the key differences between these groups, points out Montaldo, lies in how they understood their relationship with culture. In contrast to the how traditional intellectuals and artists interacted with the arts, the relationship between the masses and culture "está explícitamente mediado por el consumo. Ese público bajo será penalizado siempre por lo mismo (no sabe, no entiende)" (44). Arlt's flabby and flatulent female reader vividly illustrates, or caricaturizes, the extremes of such mindless *consumption*: literature skips the intellectual faculties entirely, to be unconsciously taken into, and unceremoniously expelled from, the body.

It was not only the lettered elite, in other words, who were agitated by these new practices of mass cultural consumption. While readers like this housewife formed part of the *gran público* and thus contributed to assuring his legitimacy as a writer, Arlt not only lamented the constraints they imposed upon his artistic liberty, but also, on occasion, saw them as a potential source of debasement. The conflicted status of the reading public in Arlt's texts suggest that if, as Montaldo maintains, the oppositional relationship between the cultural elite and "the masses" has characterized the analysis of Latin American culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this binary is not entirely sufficient for understanding the status of the reading public in the Arltian text.

Consequently, instead of restricting my interrogation of the status of the public in the Arltian text to an elite-mass binary, I will also be considering Arlt's public in terms of *embodiment*. For Arlt this multitude of readers is, fundamentally, an embodied phenomenon. By this I mean not only the integration of mind and body suggested by the term, but also that in Arlt's corpus, socio-economic mechanisms and historical forces tend to express themselves physically in and on the human body. The public is not a "category" in Arlt; it is a sensorial and corporeal reality. As Ricardo Piglia points out in his influential 1973 essay "Roberto Arlt: una crítica de la economía literaria," Arlt's writing insists on the material circumstances that give rise to it. These circumstances are not exhausted by terms like "society," "the market" or "the cultural field." The market is inseparable from its consumers, in this case the reading public, which is in turn inseparable from the bodies that constitute it. While this embodiment of the reader is not unique to Arlt, it is unusually pronounced and remarkably demystified in his

work. In large part this is because Arlt's readership, while numerous, was also circumscribed within the dense microcosm of the city of Buenos Aires. He thus had the opportunity to observe the bodies of readers on the trolley, in the street, in various bars and cafés, in the gym and at the office, and to reimagine them in his fiction, which is populated, indeed teeming, with voracious readers, more or less unhinged and all too embodied.

As the slovenly housewife and consumer of novels also suggests, the embodied and conflicted status of the reading public in Arlt's work corpus is crystallized in the figure of the female reader. The role of female readership in Arlt's corpus, then, is not an arbitrary sub-topic. She is essential to his work, to the social conflicts and tensions that underlie it and from time to time explode, not only in flatulence or fisticuffs, but also in the very form and medium of the text: through the fourth wall, in bursts of meta-fictional or extra-mediatic self-reflexivity. Through this figure, the Arltian text reveals not simply the crude economic motives hidden by a hypocritical discourse of sentimental clichés, but also how such normative discourse functions, circulates, and takes effect in and on the bodies of its readers and spectators. Because these readers constituted a significant portion of the *gran público* or consuming masses, because Arlt's critique of sentimental discourse includes not only romance or "trash" novels in the narrow sense, but also popular narratives and even newspapers, and because the readers interpolated were predominantly but not always female, I am calling this group "readers of romance." The term *romance* should here be understood to refer to popular sentimental love stories, as well as, per Merriam-Webster, "extravagant stories that lack basis in fact," for Arlt will insist, over and over again, upon the pernicious falsity of such discourses. In the pages that follow, I examine how this conflicted, embodied, and gendered figure, the reader of romances, informs Arlt's fiction, journalism, and theater.

In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen demonstrates the extent to which gender has been inscribed within the distinction between high art and mass culture. According to this commonplace, he writes, woman "is a reader of inferior literature – subjective, emotional, and passive – while man ... emerges as a writer of genuine authentic literature" (46). However, in the case of Arlt's writing, this gendered configuration of mass culture as woman is only partially true. Some of Arlt's texts do evince the stereotype of women as second-rate readers whose vulgarity denigrates by association the material they read (e.g., the slovenly housewife). However, other texts erode or even collapse this hierarchical distinction between the Male Author and the Woman Reader, revealing a considerable affinity and even identification between Arlt and the female reader.

I begin with Arlt's participation in the stereotype described by Huyssen, namely that mass and inferior culture is for women, while high and superior culture is for men. In 1929, Arlt the *cronista* suggests as much in one of his *aguafuertes* or "sketches" of daily life in the city. The *cronista* observes:

En nuestra ciudad las mujeres leen poco, en lo que se refiere a libros. La revista lo acapara todo. La mala literatura de algunas revistas, el mal cuento, la mala novela ... Lo que para nosotros son pavadas, para ella es lo fundamental. A nosotros, por ejemplo en la novela nos interesa un Raskolnicoff [*sic*]. La mujer a las tres páginas de leer los procesos psicológicos de Raskolnicoff, tiraría la novela al diablo. ("Mujeres que leen en el tranvía" 6)

The nightmare of the male writer who aspires to literary greatness would be to only be read by women. Female readers would undercut one's literary greatness because they would detract from one's prestige. Arlt, for whom, I maintain, legitimate authorship meant a reading public, but who wanted to write "great literature" and for whom great literature meant Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, sees in the female reader the sign of the frivolity of the work she reads, its status as *pavada*.

However, Arlt also betrays affinities with normatively "feminine" readers in several ways. The first is by privileging high degrees of emotional sensitivity and expressions of affect. Arlt mistrusted the didactic value of books: "lo más que puede encontrarse en un libro es la verdad del autor, no la verdad de todos los hombres," he writes in response to one of his readers (Atorresi 148). Arlt's literature places a premium on highly emotional responses: as Alan Pauls has pointed out, "un personaje, en Arlt, siempre es un abanico de estados, un soporte para la acción de intensidades y afecciones" (317). Indeed, the only Arltian reader who claims neutrality is "El escritor fracasado." Midway along his journey through every stage of literary failure, the parodic narrator of "El escritor fracasado" interjects a flash of popular "common sense:" "con poca suerte en crítica negativa y positiva, derivé hacia el sector de la crítica neutra, perfectamente objetiva y que se me ocurre podría denominarse, con un poco de sentido común, *posición del que le busca cinco pies al gato*" (*El jorobadito* 60, emphasis in original). In other words, cold and objective evaluation of a work of literature is impossible, and those who would lay claim to it only mislead their readers.

The fluctuations of emotional intensities that characterize the Arltian protagonist tend to emerge when the character interfaces with movies and literature. In the same article ostensibly written *about* the female reader of romances, but *for* the male appreciator of Dostoevsky, Arlt contemplates the women who read romance novels during their work commute. While they

read, “hacen como con todas sus cosas. Con los cinco sentidos puestos en ello, de manera que el espectáculo de ver leer a la mujer, sobre todo a una muchacha, es un cuadro único para el observador sutil ... Arruga la frente, suspira. Va ensimismada” (“Mujeres que leen en el tranvía” 6). Here the journalist invites a reader he presumes male to join him in some unapologetic voyeurism of a sexualized female reader. Her sighs and furrowed brow offer a picture and a spectacle for the observant male gaze.

This partitioning of the senses according to gender – sight and sound for the male observer, touch for the female observed – coincides with what some scholars have termed the Western “hierarchy of the senses.” As cultural historian Constance Classen explains in “The Witch’s Senses,” this hierarchy granted men “mastery over the ‘higher’ senses of sight and hearing,” while “women were linked with the ‘lower’ senses of touch, taste and smell ... [S]ight, and to a lesser extent hearing, was essentially masculine: dominating, rational, orderly in its discrete categorization of the world” (70). At the same time, the notion of reading “with all five senses involved” undercuts this tidy compartmentalization by suggesting that the female reader, while objectified, is nevertheless enjoying a more complete sensorial experience, one inaccessible to the male viewer, who can only watch. To assert that one can read with all five senses is to posit a mode of interacting with culture that integrates the corporeal *and* the intellectual, encompassing mental acts with visual metaphors like “reflection” and “imagination” as well as tactile responses more sophisticated than the digestion and excretion implicit in the act of consuming. Ultimately, this mode of reading transforms the body from a site of passive intake to a reactive locus of cultural engagement.

Inasmuch as the female reader crystallizes an intense engagement with the text that expresses itself in wordless language of the body, she also exemplifies the way Arlt himself read. In a letter to his sister explaining his decision to separate from his first wife, he writes: “si te parece poca la diferencia que hay entre nosotros te diré lo siguiente: ella permanece impassible leyendo un libro que a mí me hace llorar a gritos” (*Los siete locos* 722). And the erratic oscillation between intellectual and affective registers that characterizes his work bears witness to a childhood spent reading whatever was at hand. This included romances as well as Nietzsche, popular science, theosophy, and flawed translations of Dostoevsky. Pierre-Alexis Ponson du Terrail’s *Rocambole* novels are a favorite reference point, central to the plots of Arlt’s short story “El jorobadito” and his play *Trescientos millones*. According to Arlt’s friend and fellow writer Conrad Nalé Roxlo, “Mi madre y Arlt simpatizaron desde el primer momento. Tenían un tema inagotable en el que ambos se enfrascaban con fruición: las aventuras de Rocambole. Mi madre las había leído en su juventud y Roberto Arlt, fue, creo,

uno de los últimos lectores apasionados" (qtd. in Saítta 39). As a child who read the same books that his friends' mothers were reading, this early contact with outmoded and "feminine" literature perhaps inclined Arlt to identify, at least partially, with female readers.

It is another commonplace in the history of mass culture that love and marriage are the topics of greatest interest to the young female reader. Yet for all his dismissal (or fear) of female readers, Arlt did not flee from these topics in pursuit of some more "manly" subject. Reflections on courtship, love and marriage are central to the plots of his novels *Los lanzallamas* (1931) and *El amor brujo* (1932), his short stories "Ester Primavera," "Las fieras," "La batalla," "La hostilidad," "Una noche terrible," "Estoy cargada de muerte," "Eugenio Delmonte y los 1300 novios," "Hajid Majid el achichorado," and "Odio desde la otra vida," his plays *Prueba de amor*, *La fábrica de fantasmas*, *Trescientos millones*, and *Saverio el cruel*, many dozens of *aguafuertes*, and a public lecture, "La sinceridad en el amor," delivered in 1930 at the Centro de Estudiantes de Farmacia y Bioquímica and broadcast on the radio the following day (Saítta 85).

In all of these works, Arlt is insistently and consistently critical of the hypocritical sentimentality used to mask the economic motives of marriage. "La mayoría de las mujeres quieren arreglar económicamente sus vidas. Es decir, casarse" Arlt writes in *El Mundo* en 1931 (*Aguafuertes porteñas* 124). And everyone knows, he later writes, that "casarse es resolver el problema de la piñata, como dicen los ítalos" (133). Simple enough. And so while scholars continue to find in Arlt's work new insights into the relationship between culture and power, the permutations of language, the perils and fascination of technology, the nature of spectacle, the experience of urbanization, and the violence of modernity, Arlt's straightforward denunciation of the economic basis of amorous relations hardly seems to require further analysis.

Yet it is easy to forget how bold it was to make the kind of affirmations Arlt made in a mainstream middle-class family magazine in the early 1930s. Arlt's early critics and advocates were in fact quite sensitive to the radicalism of his opinions on love and marriage. Indeed, Arlt's critique of sexual conventions was largely responsible for his initial appeal to the Argentine leftist intelligentsia. Forgotten in the years immediately following his untimely death in 1942, Arlt made a modest reappearance onto the public scene in the 1950s in part thanks to Raúl Larra's 1950 biography *Roberto Arlt, el torturado*, which helped spur re-editions of his work. Around the same time, among Argentine intellectuals, Arlt's use of Buenos Aires argot made him attractive to the cultural journal *Contorno*, founded by David and Ismael Viñas in 1952. In his "Una historia de Contorno," the latter explains that "el



uso natural del *vos* fue nuestra puerta de entrada para nuestra reivindicación de Roberto Arlt, frente a las ‘decorosas’ posiciones de [Eduardo] Mallea, por ejemplo” (Viñas vii). Arlt’s writing was certainly local, but also ideologically elusive, an *ensalada rusa* of bourgeois, communist, anarchist, and fascist elements. Yet his overt attack on the bourgeois-capitalist institution of marriage salvaged him for mid-century Marxist and Lacanian thinkers. In his influential study *Sexo y traición en Roberto Arlt* (1965), Oscar Masotta’s argument that “el contenido político de las novelas de Arlt puede ser totalmente recuperado por la izquierda” involved emphasizing the way in which Arlt’s novels denounced the commodification of sexuality (6). Some women on the left also found Arlt’s sexual politics appealing. In 1969 Viviana Gorbato would declare in *Uno por uno*:

A los que ven pintoresquismo en Arlt, se les puede contestar que no hay nada pintoresco en la cosificación de la relación hombre-mujer ... Muchos confunden panfleto y literatura creyendo que con una exaltación del proletariado y una condenación a la burguesía se resuelve el problema de una literatura comprometida. No se dan cuenta que si alguien proveniente de la burguesía se rebela contra el sistema en que vive, no es porque le agarre un repentino amor al proletariado sino porque ve en su clase la negación de lo humano. Esta negación incide en la relación hombre-mujer, tema que trata Arlt. (3)

In the following decade, a young Ricardo Piglia would assume the task of confirming Arlt’s place (and through Arlt, his own) in the Argentine literary pantheon. While still focusing on the economic and affective dimensions of Arlt’s work, Piglia shifted the analytical framework from ideological critique to literary technique: “el dinero – podría decir Arlt – es el mejor novelista del mundo: legisla una economía de las pasiones” (“Roberto Arlt: la ficción del dinero” 25). More recently, the elastic term *bourgeois* has translated, if not transformed, critical understanding of the essentially economic logic governing heterosexual relations in Arlt’s work: as Saïtta observes, the Arltian text attempts to “desmontar, de manera cínica e irónica, los mitos burgueses del amor eterno o de la virginidad sin mancha” (86).

However, Arlt’s treatment of romance not only poses *critique of a specific institution*; his thematization of sex, courtship, and marriage also work to render visible the vast network of interrelated discourses that govern human behavior. These discourses include written texts of all kinds, spoken speech patterns, films and images, and social institutions. They are massive in their scope and normative in their function. They are sustained by both the nationalist rhetoric of the state and the consumerist logic of the market. And they impress themselves upon the bodies of the cultural subjects whose fantasies and desires in turn give rise to them, but who also

irreverently dismantle them, putting them to use, exposing both their possibilities and their limitations.

A scene from Arlt's last novel, *El amor brujo*, will demonstrate my point. In a long tirade against the family structure, the novel's protagonist (and sometimes narrator) Estanislao Balder describes the nightmare of sordid mediocrity that is the everyday existence of the contemporary middle-class urban family. The nightmare begins as a date at the cinema, "deliberadamente ñoño con los argumentos de sus películas" (*Obra completa* 575). Eventually the young suitor proposes, "plagiando escrupulosamente las modas de dos o tres eximios pederastas de la pantalla" (576). The use of the derogatory term *pederastas* underscores the reactionary, or conservative, dimension of Arlt-Balder's sweeping cultural critique; an overt female desire and a pejoratively "feminized" male sensuality heralded by early cinema's leading men threatens his traditional ideals of masculinity and female behavior. The two marry and have two or three children before falling back on a method of trimestral abortions to avoid the expense of yet another child. She transforms into a "señora respetable," while he becomes a soulless, bitter man, "ávido de pequeñas fortunas porque sabía que las grandes eran inaccesibles" (577). He will search for an escape from his life and from himself in the arms of a lover, whose photo he circulates among his work colleagues, eliciting lewd remarks. This unhappy fate, concludes Arlt-Balder, is imposed upon people by a consortium of "sociedad, escuelas, servicio militar, oficinas, periódicos y cinematógrafo" (577). The protagonist articulates his indictment of modern society as a circular narrative trajectory that begins with the furtive sexuality of the Hollywood film, then expands into a sweeping denunciation of every major social institution – society, education, military service, offices, newspapers – before concluding, once again, with a reference to the movies, where it all began. Clearly, *El amor brujo* proposes to critique romantic commonplaces by setting up a contrast between idyllic Hollywood love stories and the everyday realities of marriage and family. But in so doing, the novel also places the sentimental and normatively feminine (or demasculinized, in the case of the man who imitates the "pederastas" on the screen) cultural public as the motor of the whole system. Thus the novel's critical stance on marriage cannot be reduced to purely economic motives, nor, despite his obvious prejudices, to some essentialized notion of gender. The problem with love and marriage is not love and marriage per se, but rather the ways in which cultural representations of romance are consumed and romantic norms embodied.

The novel afforded Arlt the greatest degree of creative freedom, and it is in works like *El amor brujo* that one finds his most caustic and extensive social critiques. However, the work he submitted to periodical publications

and to local theaters demanded different literary tactics. In these popular and collaborative media, Arlt's critical attitude towards normative romantic discourses expresses itself not only less pedantically, but also more astutely, or to use one of his preferred adjectives, more *obliquely*. In magazines, newspapers, and on the stages of local theaters, the author's awareness of female readership is more pronounced, but the limits imposed upon him are also more salient: his articles are reviewed and corrected by an editor, then printed next to advertisements, other articles, and illustrations, all of which impress upon these articles other, extraneous meanings. The plays, meanwhile, are bound by the limits of the stage and dependent on the many other levels of interpretation and presentation imparted upon them by the director, performers, as well as the physically present and attentive audience. Both journalism and theater, therefore, may be understood as "framed" or "bounded" representations. Within the limits of these literary genres, Arlt enacts a critique of normative discourse governing sentiment by interpolating his readers as readers of romance, while also directing their attention towards the mediatic context or framework that contains and circulates the text or representation they are reading or viewing.

To refer to the tactics by which Arlt's journalism and theater invite a critical awareness of their surrounding media, I find useful the portmanteau term *contratextual*. *Contratextuality* captures the awareness of *context*, the deployment a series of references to other texts (intertextuality), and the highly critical, negating, *contra* attitude invoked or provoked by the author. In the remaining pages, I will explore how this *contratextuality* plays out in Arlt's journalism, considering a selection of *aguafuertes* (several of which have not yet been republished in book form) and the 1937 short story "Eugenio Delmonte y los 1300 novios." I then turn to drama, considering how Arlt puts to use elements of the romance novels in his 1932 play *Trescientos millones*.

From 1928 until his death in 1942, Arlt wrote an article almost every day for *El Mundo*, several thousand in total. For its part, the publication tripled its circulation within the first year; by the end of 1929, it was already selling 130,000 copies a day – significant numbers for a city of just over two million inhabitants (Saïtta 71). *El Mundo* marketed itself as a family newspaper, a "diario de todo el día para toda la familia"; it also broadcast "Radio *El Mundo*: para la mujer, el hogar y el niño." It was not a tabloid. Like many Latin American illustrated journals, *El Mundo* saw itself as cultivating its readers as well as informing them. Also like many other journals, it offered a special section for women, including promotions of literature that targeted women readers. Arlt's work as a regular columnist for *El Mundo* thus brought him into daily contact with a considerable number of female readers.

A series of articles on courtship and marriage published in *El Mundo* between 1929 and 1933 constructs a conversation – or quarrel – between Arlt and these readers, creating a kind of feedback loop: the text (re)presents the words of the reader back to the reader, implying a direct link with the public. In this loop, women’s responses to Arlt’s previous attacks on love and marriage are transcribed and responded to in the pages of *El Mundo*, eliciting further outcries, which he also transcribes and responds to; in contemporary parlance, he trolls them. It is a productive cycle, good for his own publicity and that of the newspaper for which he was working, and one which he seems to have enjoyed, granting him as it did the gratifying role of *journalist maudit*. Upon learning that his *aguafuertes* have attained the honor of being forbidden in certain respectable homes, he writes: “Yo engordo de satisfacción. Sí, engordo con maldiciones y con felicitaciones” (*Aguafuertes porteñas* 164). So did his book sales. An acerbic letter signed by “una joven casada, enamorada de su marido” mentions by way of additional insult that “a título de curiosidad, he leído su libro *Los siete locos* y me pareció extremadamente repugnante; lo que me hizo pensar que es incapaz de escribir algo puro que haga vibrar las cuerdas sensibles del alma sencilla de una mujer honesta” (163). She was so outraged that she went right out and bought his novel. The prefabricated resonances of the “cuerdas sensibles del alma sencilla” in this letter also exemplify the contratextual nature of Arlt’s critique of romantic norms. The reader’s affected mode of expressing her indignation reveals the extent to which she is mediated by the network of dominant discourses governing sexuality, courtship and marriage. In many of Arlt’s novels, this kind of parroting (often but not always ascribed to women) tends to further disturb the already unhinged male protagonists because it makes the boundary between fiction and reality, or between discourse and the body, seem even more porous than before.

Many of Arlt’s *aguafuertes* present themselves as documentation of how contemporary women were speaking about marriage. In addition to titles like “Interesantes cartas de mujeres” and “Lo que dicen las mujeres,” some presented themselves as direct quotes – “¡Quiero casarme!,” “Se casa ... ¡o lo mato!,” “Quieren que me case con otro,” and so forth. Likely a mixture of the real, the embellished, and the invented, Arlt’s regular use of direct quotation in these titles at the very least signals that these *aguafuertes* aspired to a precise, word-for-word register of the way in which the average young woman of Buenos Aires spoke.

But Arlt does not limit his intervention to provoking or ridiculing the hopelessly narrow-minded or naive. In his capacity as *cronista*, he also publishes letters and interviews that reveal a broader spectrum of registers and a more complete picture of the problem at hand. The *aguafuerte*

"Interesantes cartas de mujeres," for example, includes excerpts of letters from six female readers. The first points out that if men are so incensed about marriage, "las leyes han creado ustedes, los hombres, y las mujeres no hacen más que cumplirlas; de manera que ¿de qué se quejan ustedes?" (156). The second insists that men also lie, and "¿Cómo ser sincera si los actos de ellos están demostrando de continuo insinceridad?" (157). Two other letters attribute female duplicity to the fact that if, during courtship, the woman shows even a minimal familiarity with sex, the suitor assumes the worst and flees for the hills: ignorance is taken as proof of virginal purity. Another reader expresses her unflagging support for Arlt – "está usted haciendo una verdadera obra humanitaria" – while the last takes a geopolitical turn: "Aquí no existen como en otros países (EEUU por ejemplo) leyes que amparen a la mujer contra la picardía de muchos vivos"; she asks Arlt to use his influential position to muster up support for a law like one of Italy's, where men must either marry or pay increasing fees to the state (159). This *aguafuerte* circulates a representation of female discourse that, while selected and monitored by the male writer and presented to the male reader, also presents well-reasoned counterpoints that do not always deprive female readers of legitimacy. Here six anonymous women gain, albeit partially and momentarily, a prominent media platform in which to express their opinion. While he undoubtedly reflects many of the masculinist values of his society, it would be unfair to say that Arlt vilifies women; he ridicules the normative discourse that mediates them, the parroted clichés.

If Arlt deployed in his column in *El Mundo* contratextual devices that showcased the interpenetration of romances and daily life, the short story "Eugenio Delmonte y los 1300 novios" constructs a meta-journalistic space that directs its contratextual critique at the newspaper, no less responsible for reifying harmful sexual and social normativity. Set in the port city of Natiópolis (allegory for Buenos Aires), the story begins when the similarly allegorical Enriqueta Silver (one notes the monetary connotations of the first and last name), at the behest of her parents, terminates her relationship with the impoverished young Eugenio Delmonte. A year later, and much to the chagrin of the Silvers, the heartbroken young man inherits \$50 million from a distant relative. He immediately leaves Natiópolis, returning some years later in a gigantic yacht. Upon docking, Eugenio refuses to see anyone, but immediately sends an advertisement to be printed in each of the city's four major newspapers: "Dejad que los novios vengan a mí. Eugenio Delmonte quiere ayudarles. Todos los jóvenes de esta ciudad que haga más de un año que están de novios pueden acudir a Eugenio Delmonte en procura de ayuda" (*Cuentos completos* 458). One thousand five hundred suitors heed Eugenio's summons, congregating before him in the Teatro Electra. Here, Eugenio advises them that a man should only marry after

having lived a series of possible experiences, and that these experiences are only achievable by travelling. He then offers every one of them a free two-year trip around the world together on his yacht, all expenses paid. All but two hundred of the suitors immediately sign the contract and prepare to set sail.

The narrator of "Eugenio Delmonte" is an unnamed acquaintance of Eugenio, who assembles the story out of fictional quotes lifted from four invented newspapers (mirroring the four dominant Buenos Aires periodicals of the 1930s: *La Nación*, *La Prensa*, *La Razón*, and Arlt's *El Mundo*). The rest is taken from Eugenio's speech before the 1,500 suitors. The narrative, then, is not so much recounted as it is reconstructed from an imaginary archive of public discourse. In so doing, the narrative implies that even mainstream and supposedly serious journalism is complicit in the propagation of pernicious sentimental cliché.

Arlt's inspiration for Eugenio's floating male utopia may have been the frigate *ARA Presidente Sarmiento*. The ship completed thirty-seven educational voyages between 1899 and 1938, the last concluding around the time of the publication of "Eugenio Delmonte." It is currently docked in Puerto Madero, several blocks away from the Casa Rosada, where it functions as an historical monument. A plaque next to the point of entrance explains the ideological function of the voyages:

El ideal de Sarmiento era que los jóvenes marineros recorrieran el mundo: "Que viajen, que pasen de un país a otro, observando, aprendiendo, asimilándose la cultura de los viejos países y sobre todo, haciendo ver a esas viejas naciones que aquí, en el Río de la Plata, prospera una nacionalidad con elementos propios." (Sarmiento and Unknown)

In Sarmiento's articulation of 19th-century nation-building, the cosmopolitan exhibitionism of this floating spectacle of national prosperity was a way for the new Latin American nation to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of Old World colonial powers. In contrast, Eugenio Delmonte's version of the "young men's educational voyage" not only jettisons the insecure nationalism of the *ARA Presidente Sarmiento* project but also undermines the marriage and family structure, an essential building block of the nation (and of the national economy). Arlt's story suggests that, were such an opportunity ever actually presented to the young men of the port city, not a single young man would choose marriage and banal domesticity over a life of adventure. The result would be nothing less than total social collapse. A fictional "quote" from the morning paper *El Intransigente* spells out in detail the disastrous consequences of Delmonte's recapitulation of Sarmiento's great nationalist field trip:

Delmonte arruina a nuestra ciudad. Delmonte, de un plumazo, destruye numerosas aspiraciones legítimas y fundadas ... [T]odos los diversos ciudadanos dedicados a las más variadísimas formas de industria humana quedan de facto perjudicados por esta insólita intromisión del señor Delmonte, que sustrayendo a la ciudad mil trescientos novios posterga para tiempo indefinido mil trescientos matrimonios, es decir, mil trescientas operaciones comerciales, cuya dilatación alterará en forma ostensible la economía de nuestra ciudad. (*Cuentos completos* 462)

In these dire circumstances, the paper must disregard any sentimental pretenses about love and acknowledge the crude economic motivations, not only of the young brides-to-be and their families, but of the entire local economic system. Once again, an Arltian story that begins as a critique of the institution of marriage eventually works to expose the entire network of economic and power relationships that sustain this allegorical society's status quo.

On the one hand, the story reaffirms a stereotype, common throughout Arlt's fiction, of the husband-hunting woman (or her mother) as petty capitalist villain: refusing to work, she tries to satisfy her endless material demands through sexual manipulation, imposing upon her suitor an involuntary celibacy until at last the young male is adequately domesticated. On the other hand, imbricated in the satirical fantasy is a definite agenda that directly satirizes the institutions of home and family that form the ideological cornerstone of the journal in which this story is published, which happens to be the women's journal *El Hogar*.

Notably, this time it is not Arlt's naive young female reader, but rather the editors of a major media outlet who parrot romantic clichés, as when they lament the frustration of one thousand three hundred aspirations to "la legítima santidad del tálamo" (463). The "masculine" discourse of the newspaper becomes yet another "sentimental fiction." Here again, as in the letters from women printed in the *aguafuertes*, there is a reflection on the infiltration of sentimental cliché into female speech. Shortly after Eugenio returns in his yacht,

Enriqueta Silver, la ex novia de Eugenio, hizo estas declaraciones a un reportero (textuales): 'Eugenio Delmonte fue mi novio. Un sino fatal impidió que él me condujera al tálamo nupcial, pero yo que le he tratado de cerca puedo dar fehaciente testimonio de cuán cristalina es la bondad que fluye de su corazón.' Ruego a los lectores no extrañarse de semejante estilo; Enriqueta Silver era la lectora de todas las páginas de modas y sociales de las revistas de Natiópolis. (459)

Enriqueta parrots the city's fashion and society columns; she fails to differentiate their discourse from that of real events. The narrator, a compiler of clippings, assumes the role of discourse analyst, presuming his

readers to be as perplexed as he is by Enriqueta's inability to distinguish between the fluffy language of romantic fiction and her own life.

The passage thus constructs, within the confines of the story, two readers: the silly and deceitful Enriqueta, reader of magazines and hunter of husbands, and an ideal or uncorrupted reader so far removed from Enriqueta that the narrator feels compelled to translate or footnote her speech. And reading these two readers is the third or "real" reader of Arlt's story, who, in its original context, is also a reader of *El Hogar*. In other words, the real-life reader of Arlt's story reads the narrator read Enriqueta, who is described as a reader of the kind of women's magazines that the real-life reader is, at that very moment, reading. The story therefore responds to normative sentimental discourse's pernicious blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality by repeating the same process, but *in reverse*: the story jumps a level, gesturing beyond itself and draws its reader's attention to the medium in which it appears. This contratextual device inscribes within the narrative structure of the story a reflection on how the media manipulate one's perception of the world and condition one's behavior within it.

A similar mode of contratextuality is at work in Arlt's most direct engagement with romances and their readers, the play *Trescientos millones*, first performed in 1931 in Leónidas Barletta's Teatro del Pueblo. The play's action occurs in the encounter between two spheres of existence: the servant girl Sofia's little bedroom, and a kind of meta-fictional waiting room occupied by stock characters of popular fiction. While the patron's drunken son bangs on the door from offstage, threatening to barge in and rape her, Sofia, a poor immigrant and an orphan, seeks refuge in a fantasy world. She imagines inheriting millions, travelling, being courted, and participating in family dramas. But all her dreams are nothing more than stock characters of contemporary mass culture – Rocambole, the Byzantine Queen, Prince Charming, and so on, the 1930s equivalents of Disney characters and Marvel superheroes. Ultimately these figments betray her, and she kills herself just as her would-be violator breaks into her room. The familiar and comforting tropes of mass media seem to promise social solidarity by offering a widely-shared system of cultural reference, only to abandon their readers at the eleventh hour. While stock characters of mass culture offer the playwright the basic elements for a creative critique of mass culture, for the (female) reader and working woman who serves as the play's protagonist, mass media can only offer a temporary retreat into a meager and impoverished fantasy world.

Vicky Unruh has characterized the play as an investigation of "the continuities and disjunctions between a creator's represented and lived reality" (174). And in her biography of Arlt, Saïtta divides the play into "el



espacio de la realidad que es el cuarto de Sofía y el espacio de la imaginación” (100). However, describing the setting for the “real space” of the play, the servant girl’s room, Arlt calls for a “cuartujo, encalado de verde claro” which has “la desolada perspectiva de policromía de una novela de entregas por Luis de Val,” referring to a prolific writer of romantic fiction, popular in both his native Spain and in Buenos Aires (*Teatro completo* 63). *Trescientos millones* was not meant to be set in a realistic servant’s garret, but rather within a highly stylized and romance novel-ized space. This cover of de Val’s *Dice una mujer*, published in 1927, will serve to illustrate Sofía’s “polychromatic desolation” (Fig. 1):



Figure 1. (Public Domain).

Prior to any explicit references to mass fiction, Arlt endeavors to establish an immediate *visual* rapport with his imagined spectator by inserting allusions to covers of popular romances in his stage descriptions: the lighting alone should be sufficient to invoke a “de Val” ambience (Arlt assumes the director and set designers will all know what that means). For her part Sofía, the “personaje real” and tragic heroine of the play, is in fact supposed to conjure up in the minds of the audience gathered in the Teatro del Pueblo an image of the heroine of a romance novel: she resembles,

writes Arlt, Rina, the Angel of the Alps “o cualquier otra pelandusca destinada a enternecer el corazón de estopa de las lectoras de Carolina Invernizio o Pérez Escrich” (63). The thrust of the play’s social critique, then, is certainly not that one must learn how to relinquish one’s fantasies and face the “real world,” for there is no untouched “reality” to which Sofia could appeal. *Il n’y pas de hors-Luis de Val*.

Before they are called away, the stock characters of mass media that populate Sofia’s imagination discuss how they view their relationship with their readers and viewers. The Demon opines that they are the “protagonists of men’s dreams.” Rocambole insists that no, fictional characters merely represent men’s desires. The Cubic Man sketches out a mechanical metaphor in which the characters are machines which accumulate men’s dreams. And Prince Charming (Galán) cuts the conversation short by snapping “De cualquier modo, el hombre es esclavo de su sueño ... Es decir, esclavo nuestro” (*Teatro completo* 55). Prince Charming proposes the most passive vision of the reader: man is slave to his dreams, we are his dreams, ergo he is our slave.

And yet Prince Charming, the most authoritarian and manipulative character, the character most closely aligned to a vision of the pernicious network of romantic cliché, is also the one who momentarily interrupts the fiction. No longer able to stifle his frustration with his female readers, he momentarily breaks character, fed up with their artificial courtship “comedies” and their sexual manipulation: “Me revientan todas las mujeres, empezando por usted. Me revientan la forma como besan...la comedia que hacen ... Me revientan porque todo el placer que proporcionan no valen copetines que se beben a costa de uno. (Súbita transición). Perdóneme ... me olvidaba que estaba haciendo el papel del Galán” (80). In this encounter between theatrical character and human reader, the character turns human to attack the theatricality of the human reader. Much as it did with the play’s Luisdevalian set design, here the play exploits a sentimental discourse familiar to the audience as a means of inverting its underlying presumptions. Prince Charming, easily found in any tale of romance and the one who thinks of reading as the “enslavement” of the reader’s desire, is also the one who breaks character, who permits the rupture of the spectacle, the hole in the canvas. Rather than seeking alternatives to this mainstream romantic discourse, *Trescientos millones* emphasizes the hegemony of normative discourse that govern the behaviors, speech, and desires of the readers of romances by pushing this discourse to confront itself, the stock character to forget his role, the media to mock itself. Through such contratextual devices, the play envisions the possibility of self-awareness, though not escape or salvation, for the readers of romances.

The masses, writes Graciela Montaldo, are an agent of chaos (44). The disruptive emergence of this great multitude of consumers onto the cultural field sparks a permanent short-circuit in the interior of modern Latin America letters: “algo hay en la presencia de ese sujeto del caos que vuelve a las prácticas culturales letradas reactivas y desintegradas” (44). *Algo hay*: otherwise precise in her description of the dynamics governing Latin American cultural production and its study, here she gestures towards a residual indeterminacy, as if recognizing the unpredictable energies the masses release, or as if just *what* it is about the masses that “disintegrates” or “catalyzes” lettered practices might vary from context to context, author to author. I have pointed to some of the issues and authorial strategies involved in Arlt’s representation of the reading masses, ranging from overt denunciation to oblique parody and allegory, from quoting readers’ letters to contratextuality. Collectively, these strategies suggest that one of Arlt’s great accomplishments as a writer lies in his imaginative and fruitful deployment of these masses – not just even but especially the seemingly docile sector of middle- and working-class female readers of romances – precisely *as* “agents of chaos.” To write about and for (and on occasion, against) those who read “con los cinco sentidos puestos” results not only in contradictions, but also in a richer formal complexity and a more potent critique of the manipulative potency of hegemonic narratives and the incredible influence that contemporary mass media wield over the social body. The Arltian text does not simply document, celebrate, or champion the multitude of readers of romance: it incorporates and make productive use of their chaotic disordering of discourses.

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