

RUNO LAGOMARSINO
TALES FROM THE
UNDERWORLD

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REARVIEW
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1.

In November 1976 the father of the artist (who isn't yet born) disembarks in the harbour of Barcelona, with his wife and his daughter, only a few months old. As members of an armed resistance organisation they have just fled from Argentina, from the terror imposed since eight months by the bloodiest military dictatorship the country has known. (And it has known many.)

Sitting on a suitcase, the father of the artist (who will be born one year later) smokes a cigarette, forgets about 'fear and death' and thinks of more immediate things: the trunk he has put in storage, the boxes with the little he had managed to bring, the boarding house in Raval which a seaman had told him has affordable rooms, the strange limbo, between past and future, in which he is now smoking his first cigarette as an exile, the feeling – almost the certainty – that he and his family will survive. Here, in Barcelona, and anywhere.

2.

In a video that the artist will record almost half a century later, *Yo también soy humo*, lasting three minutes and 16 seconds – about as long as it takes for a cigarette to be smoked on a suitcase in a harbour – the father's voice gives some details of the humble capital of the exile. 'Bedsheets', he says, 'crockery, tools.' There were also two records, one with tango (Piazzolla), one with Argentine rock (Almendra), and a few books. He doesn't say which books.

For a moment the father tries to stop thinking about the only thing he can think about: how he will 'make a living' in this new city, about which he knows little more than a handful of trivial facts from a tourist guide. Then he gets up and puts his cigarette out on an old postcard of Barcelona's harbour.

3.

The father keeps his word and survives. He manages to make a living in Barcelona, and then in Lund, Sweden, where his son, the artist, is born. Years later the father returns to Spain, where he now lives. The artist son stays in Sweden. If the ambition of the father was to survive, that of the son is, always, more suspect: to keep something. A rest, a trace, a relic of that survival.

'Some books', the father said, smoking on his suitcase in the harbour of Barcelona. Almost half a century later the artist son dispels the cloudy vagueness of this 'some' and shows us a book, a single one, the one he left, the only one. How and why that book was left with him, by which mysterious ways – absent-mindedness, coincidence, carelessness, stealthy appropriation – it became part of the artist's belongings, this we cannot know. No one will ever know.

4.

The book is not just any book. It is *El juguete rabioso* (1926), the most anomalous classic of Argentine literature. A unique book, written in absolutely eccentric Spanish by a son of Prussian immigrants with an unpronounceable surname: Roberto Arlt. When people asked how 'that' was written, Arlt responded: 'It's not my fault that some ancestor, born in who knows which remote village in Germany or Prussia, happened to be called Arlt.' Had he been able to choose, Arlt said, he would have preferred to be called 'Ramón González or Justo Pérez', much more unnoticeable names in early twentieth-century Argentina. 'No one', he said, 'would have asked me if I am Roberto Giusti [a contemporary intellectual], and that reader with her Mefistophelian typewriter smile would never have written to me: "I know who you are behind your Arlt!"'

For all that, Arlt, with the sensitivity about ambivalence that is usually part of the immigrant's *modus operandi*, did something more than object to the suspicion his surname aroused. He used it, mostly for his own enjoyment, like those who discover a glaring energy in the contemptuous stigmatisation of victims and go so far as to turn it into a voluptuous talisman, a safeguard, a magic weapon. '[Arlt.] Isn't that perhaps an elegant, solid surname worthy of a count or baron? Isn't it perhaps a surname worthy of appearing on

a bronze plaque on a locomotive or on one of those odd machines that supposedly make up "Arlt's many-faceted machine"?'

Arlt built this 'many-faceted machine' from words. It is a savage, complex, idiosyncratic literary machine, and it caused as much discomfort and unease as the author's harsh Prussian surname. It was said of Arlt that he had no culture, that his Spanish was faulty and that he practised 'realism in the poorest taste', that he wrote badly, that there was not the slightest proportionality between his ambitions and his means.

Arlt, being an immigrant, had nothing and wanted to have everything. For the prevailing taste, which has always wielded its power most efficiently by defining the 'good' proportions between things, this deficiency of scale could only mean one thing: scandal ('A son of immigrants', Arlt's daughter once said, 'should not be a writer but a prison guard.'). It was a scandal also for his peers and allies, immigrants like him, also without titles or prestige, newcomers in a world that hadn't been expecting them.

This is how one of them, the writer and editor Elias Castelnuovo, the perhaps most 'natural' interlocutor for Arlt to confide in, responds to the manuscript for *El juguete rabioso* (then still called *La vida puerca*) that Arlt brings to him: 'To say he didn't know his grammar is a compliment', Castelnuovo remembers. 'Without even mentioning spelling and editing errors, I pointed out twelve badly used words, all highly etymologically charged, whose meaning he was unable to clarify. In addition, they were in the context of two antagonistic styles. On the one hand noticeable influences from Maxim Gorky, on the other hand the presence of Vargas Vila [a Colombian writer of popular erotic melodrama]. I pointed out this contrast as well... I told him, finally, that as it was, *La vida puerca* could not be published.'

5.

But it was published. The copy brought by the artist's father in his exile luggage is the edition of 1968. It has 122 pages, soft covers and a particular format. With its 18.5 × 10.5 centimetres it fits perfectly in a pocket and can be read on the street, on the underground or in a bar, which was exactly the social and progressive reading scene that Centro Editor de América Latina, its publishers, had in mind.

A book with broad appeal, accessible to all. It cost 160 pesos – as much as it sells for in an online marketplace today, although between that price and this you would have to put back the 13 zeros that evaporated during the most insane half-century in Argentina's insane history of inflation.

El juguete rabioso is number 42 in Biblioteca Argentina Fundamental, a collection of novels, poetry books and essays accompanying the popular fascicles of Capitulo, a formidable project by Centro Editor compiling 150 years of Argentine literary history into weekly instalments that were sold in kiosks, among newspapers and magazines.

(42 was also Arlt's age when he he died of tuberculosis. The author is the man appearing on the book cover, pictured in the mid-1930s during a trip through Morocco. The beard and tunic are almost certainly concessions by Arlt, who was also a journalist, to local African style.)

6.

We know more or less what to do with the famous deserted island. But how to choose which book to bring with us into exile? Pressed for time, faced with danger, we must make up our mind. What to choose? A book that reminds us of where we come from, that embodies the language, the place and the familiar things that will no longer be ours and that preserves them and plants them, like a flag, into the foreign ground where we alight?

This 'flashback' book, about identity and persistence? Or a book that would be pure 'forward', detached and greedy, capable of travelling well, of sneaking across borders without losing steam and of breaking through into the unknown with curiosity and shrewdness, attentive to sounds, voices, new stories, looking out for possibilities that will suggest themselves? What to choose: a book for resistance? Or for conquest?

7.

We were not inside the head of the artist's father in November 1976, as he hurriedly filled his trunk and his boxes. We don't know why he chose *El juguete rabioso*, but we do know that he chose well. That he couldn't have chosen better. Among other things – and this is the secret of right decisions – because Arlt's novel refuses to adapt to the set of terms seemingly on offer in the antechamber of exile. *El juguete rabioso* is – like all of Arlt's writing, come to think of it – neither a nostalgic nor a forward-looking book. It is a rearview book, moving forward as it looks back and remembering as it conquers.

8.

The protagonist, Silvio Astier, is a lower-middle-class youth in Buenos Aires in the 1920s. His life, at the same time precarious and exciting, unfolds in the street, between bare necessity and delinquency, and in his imagination, a heated cellar where the fantasies of popular fiction mix with contemporary advances in technical and scientific knowledge. An explosive cocktail.

The hero's heroes are marginal, exceptional characters, anomalies who obstruct or despise the entire social machinery and its functioning: bandits (Rocambole, the seductive murderer in Ponson Du Terail's novels), inventors, forgers, poètes maudits like Baudelaire, who suspend the world order with the beauty they invent.

Obsessed with money, Astier tries his hand at various ways of obtaining it throughout the novel: robbery, a succession of punishing jobs, the denunciation of a coup that he himself had helped plot. *El juguete rabioso* is a picaresque Bildungsroman plagued by social mannerisms, tormented trance and manipulative self-betterment, chronicling an initiatory calvary that only adds one fiasco to the next.

9.

Actually, the only thing Astier wants to do – the only thing he wishes he could continue doing – is to read. He has – perhaps like the artist's father – the idea that books, with all their fantasy, their unreality, their imaginary worlds, are not illusions, let alone escape routes, but models to live by, strategic scripts, instruction manuals to be put into action. They are 'tools', like those the artist's father says he brought with him in his luggage into exile.

If he reads in order to escape, if he allows himself to get carried away by the serialised novels he devours, it is because Astier has a particularly non- escapist idea of escape. A critical idea, we might say. The worlds into which he disappears – the social fairy tales of penny novels – are in fact accusations against the insufferable conditions of a world offering nothing but oppression, injustice, cruelty.

These are not just dream worlds. They are worlds at the margins of legality; their twists and turns, their rules, their risky and unlikely actions in which Astier is so fond of losing himself are at the same time tools that help him return from his reveries and train himself for wakefulness in the sleepless world of misery and humiliation, for 'a pig's life'. *La vida puerca*. Like *Don Quijote* or *Madame Bovary*, other legendary 'reading victims', Astier uses his reading to denounce the life he leads and postulate another possible life, a desirable life.

10.

There is much talk about 'struggle for life' in *El juguete rabioso*. With its anarcho-Darwinist overtones, the expression seems to echo the line with which the artist's father challenges himself in the harbour of Barcelona, as he sits on a suitcase and smokes: 'making a living'.

It is November 1976. He has just gone into exile and cannot know then that after a while he will no longer be in Barcelona or even in Spain but much further away, in a Swedish city called Lund, working as a labourer in a paper mill – he, who just months before had been a student of sociology and a member of a guerrilla movement.

Few things are more important than paper in *El juguete rabioso*. Which sounds reasonable for a novel whose action often takes place in bookshops and which speaks of books, of the books its reading addict protagonist reads, the books he desires and steals, the books he exchanges, the books

reduces to money, the books he refuses to sell and those he ends up keeping for himself, the 'most wonderful' books, too intense to be reintroduced into an economic logic that cheapens them.

On two occasions, however, paper figures as paper-in-itself, before being turned into a book or into something else, like bank notes, for example. One is when Astier, employed in a rather sordid bookshop, attempts to revenge the indignities inflicted on him and takes a match and throws it onto a bunch of papers in the backroom of the premises. The second, later on, is when the character, now sweating and suffering as a door-to-door paper salesman, receives a batch he had managed to sell to a butcher in return and suddenly sees that paper in the warehouse: soiled, battered, splattered with mud and blood.

Somehow, the paper in the novel is a site of rancour; paper – which in a sense is pure possibility – is what degrades and is degraded, which leads to those crises of dull resentment that Astier, a bit like Dostoevsky, is only able to 'resolve' through a blind and also failed act: by burning it. (Or by putting out the first cigarette in exile on it, as the father does in the video of his artist son.)

11.

As he was sitting on his suitcase, smoking, the artist's father couldn't know that his first life as an exile would be lead in a paper mill. Maybe he wasn't in the mood for making predictions. Maybe he preferred to keep his destiny in the dark, in those folds were the future usually crouches. The folds of a book, for example. The book he had chosen to bring with him into exile. Maybe he didn't know, but *El juguete rabioso* did, in its own way, as the fiction on paper it was and still is.

But what about the artist? Did the artist know? Had the artist read *El juguete rabioso* when he introduced himself to Åkerlund & Rausing (today A&R Carton) – the paper mill where his father had worked – and convinced them to do what he wanted them to do: print thousands of copies of the cover for the edition of Artl's novel that his father had chosen to bring with him into exile?

And if he had read it, why did he want to print only the cover and the back cover? Why did he leave the text out? 40 years after his father started his life in exile, and as a labourer, the

artist repatriates the paper from the past and lets it enter the scene one more time. He makes it read from another sheet, as it were. Because now the paper is the paper from the paper mill and the paper from Arlt's novel; it is the paper in which his father invested his labour and the paper on which *El juguete rabioso* survives.

The role of the paper is no longer to be held hostage by rancour; it is no longer a scapegoat, nor a symbol of capital that humiliates and must be spent, ruined, burned. It is an alchemic object, a faint miracle, a mirage, maybe: something that reproduces a memory while preserving the enigma of its content.

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