

Reinaldo Arenas's Picaresque Image in *Before Night Falls*

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Reinaldo Arenas, Cuban novelist, short-story writer, and a target of the homophobic revolutionary Cuban government, became one of the most vocal dissidents opposed to the Castro regime shortly after his arrival in the United States. He arrived by means of the Mariel boatlift on May 5, 1980, not as a counterrevolutionary writer of international fame, but as a felon with a criminal record. During the "American years," the last ten years of his life, he survived in grim conditions in shot-gun apartments in New York City's Hell's Kitchen (Giesbert 60). Strongly self-identified as a Marielito, a term originally loaded with negative socio-economic connotations, Arenas developed for himself a role as an outlaw with a carefully orchestrated public image. Controversially, he often used increasingly graphic accounts of his own gay sexual behavior as part of his political activism against the Cuban revolutionary government. His open decision to write about gay sexual themes climaxed with the posthumous publication of his autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (1992); *Before Night Falls* (1993).

This essay examines Arenas's handling of the traditional genre of *la picaresca* as a narrative model for the explicit sexual passages in his autobiography, an iconoclastic text, particularly aggressive in its revelation of taboo practices. *Before Night Falls* is an extraordinary autobiographical documentation of Arenas's memoirs, with which he challenged the homophobic views of Cuban society and, particularly, the Cuban Revolution's repression and persecution of gays. At the center of these passages is Arenas's image as the ultimate outlaw, a daring *pícaro*, who boasted of his gay behavior. His homosexual adventures are part of Arenas's well-defined self-portrait as a counter-revolutionary mischief-maker in the guise of a *pícaro*, an antithesis to the revolutionary concept of the "new man."

Although Arenas did not document the specific moment in his schooling when he came across the picaresque novel, it is safe to assume that it may have taken place during his initial literary training at the Cuban National Library. His favorite work was *El Lazarillo de Tormes*, Spain's first "novela picaresca," published in 1554. In the Library he may have read an adult version of this classic. Arenas could have read earlier, however, an edited version for young readers, because *El Lazarillo* is often part of the curriculum for high-school students throughout most Latin American countries. The *pícaro* is also a common popular motif, associated with folk characters, often children or young people, whose wit is central to their survival in the world of oppressive adults. The phrase, "he is a *pícaro*" frequently signifies a male (either a child or a man) whose mischievous behavior takes him into unusual adventures. This free-spirited view of life also relieves him from a routine and otherwise plain existence. In the Caribbean today, the term often describes the sexual behavior of a macho character, including the man who is prone to engage in promiscuous, straight sexual encounters.

Arenas's numerous accounts of his adventures as a scofflaw reflect his early attraction to the picaresque. According to his good friend Juan Abreu, in 1974 Arenas was already at work on his autobiography, patterned after *El Lazarillo* (*Sombra...* 45). That first manuscript appears to have been lost. Another eye-witness has commented upon the similarity between Arenas's behavior and that of the main character in *El Lazarillo*. That is the opinion of Lázaro Gómez Carriles, a good friend of Arenas and co-scriptwriter of Julian Schnabel's film *Before Night Falls* (2000). In a scene of the film that appears inconsequential to the plot, Arenas is at the beach, reading *El Lazarillo*, when a handsome young man approaches him. The conversation is not about sex, but about *El Lazarillo*. Believing that the youth's interest is a "come-on," Arenas invites him to join him at his nearby apartment to hear French records by Edith Piaf, which at the time had been prohibited in Cuba. When Arenas (played by Spanish actor Javier Bardem) reaches out and simply touches the young man's hand (of the French actor Oliver Martínez), the latter goes wild, punches Arenas in the face and leaves the scene in a hurry.

Gómez Carriles spoke about the significance of this episode, which does not appear in the autobiography, in the "commentary" version of the film on the DVD. He admitted that he was that young man. Later he

befriended Arenas in the latter's last dwelling in Havana. An item relevant to the discussion of Arenas's attraction to and involvement with underage males is Gómez Carriles's statement that the beach scene took place when he himself was a minor and that Arenas did not coerce him into sexual acts. This comment is consistent with Arenas's own repeated declarations in the autobiography that all of his intimate encounters with young people were consensual.¹ Arenas remembers these young guys with various sexy adjectives, such as "muchacho estupendo" (122), marvelous boy; "muchacho guapísimo" (125), extremely handsome boy; and "bellísimos adolescentes" (127), "very beautiful young guys." They are protagonists of the most graphic and erotic episodes in the autobiography.² The film, however, portrays Reinaldo (young and adult) as rather naïve in the art of seduction, a characterization that contradicts Arenas's many anecdotes revealing his boldness in obtaining for himself gratification in picaresque settings, such as deserted beaches or public parks.

Upon his arrival in the United States, Arenas had chosen to remain an outlaw. He often referred to his criminal incarceration in Cuba as a political case. In reaction to social inequality, Arenas felt attracted to the rebellious character of the *pícaro*. Invited by Dolores Koch, director of the Spanish division of The Regents Publishing Company, in 1984 Arenas published his own version of *El Lazarillo*.³ Arenas's text seems to have been intended for American students of intermediate Spanish. A significant element of this edition is Arenas's introduction. The original manuscript, available in the Arenas collection in the Princeton Library, is a text (written in Spanish) longer than its version published in English. One outstanding paragraph (eliminated from the published version) contains Arenas's passionate defense of the picaresque against critics who had labeled it a "negative genre." He explains that oppressive socio-economic conditions in Spain had led to the rise to fame of Lázaro (protagonist of *El Lazarillo*) as the novel's antihero:

Los términos deben ser invertidos. No es el *Lazarillo* el creador del pícaro español, es la corrompida sociedad de su época quien crea a Lazarillo y demás pícaros, entre los cuales Lázaro viene a ser no sólo el más inofensivo, sino también la víctima y el chivo expiatorio de aquella sociedad. [The terms must be inverted: Lázaro is not the creator of the Spanish picaresque, the corrupt society of the time created all pícaros, among whom Lázaro is one of the least offensive. They were victims and scapegoats of that society.]⁴

The unusual character's mischievousness as a way to resist social and economic marginality obviously appealed to Arenas. He had displayed an early interest in depicting his literary male child characters (some clearly inspired by his own childhood experiences) engaged in wandering escapades. His increasingly bold choice to place these characters in identifiable homosexual settings may have been at the root of censorship of his works by the Cuban revolutionary publishing institutions.

These restrictions, which Arenas fought throughout his life, were absent in his autobiography. Writing shortly before his death, Arenas stated his intention that *Before Night Falls* appear posthumously, a fact that may explain the crude language and the controversial content of the book's explicit sexual passages. His intention to shock his readers is evident in a letter to his good friends Jorge and Margarita Camacho in 1989; in that letter he described his manuscript in progress as "a scandal, perhaps posthumous."⁵ True to his prediction, in *Before Night Falls* Arenas depicted his life as part of a series of complex adventures in which he, as a *pícaro* and, eventually, an outlaw, came under constant surveillance by Cuban cultural officials and police agents in a complex network of informants. His case differs from that of closeted intellectuals living in Cuba in two ways: He daringly smuggled manuscripts abroad (against Cuban regulations), and his gay adventures took place in both secret and open settings, often on his beloved beaches of Havana. His arrest, on charges of corruption of minors, Arenas vehemently claimed was part of an orchestrated plan to stop him from smuggling his literary production.

The highly episodic vignettes in *Before Night Falls* can be categorized in four significant time periods: One, Arenas's childhood in an impoverished countryside and his youth in a rural town; second, his life in Havana in his early twenties; third, his period of disillusionment with the Cuban Revolution, and of the smuggling of his literary manuscripts, which led to official harassment; and the fourth and final, his incarceration in the Morro prison, 1974-1976. After his jail sentence, he continued to live the life of a *pícaro*, jobless and barely surviving in extremely poor conditions. His childhood period in the countryside, although it is described in terms of daring erotic experimentation, does not constitute a cohesive picture of picaresque adventures but rather the "coming to age" of a gay child. Periods two, three and four exhibit a strong counterrevolutionary ideological content, but there are examples of his self-characterization as a "streetwise" *pícaro* engaged in numerous

daring adventures. All four periods have in common episodes of sexual gratification. The most daring ones involve Arenas's picaresque "know-how" in evading police restrictions in his enjoyment of the above mentioned activities, particularly those performed in public places.

In this paper, I have chosen to comment briefly on periods one and four, focusing on incidents that Arenas witnessed in his late teenage years immediately after the triumph of the Cuban revolution. His image of himself in that period can be described as that of a *pícaro* in training. Only after his arrival in Havana at age twenty, did Arenas become a true sexual outlaw, involved in a series of events that I will trace concisely here.

At age sixteen Arenas became a student in a recently created boarding school, known as "La Pantoja." There he continued to deal with his issues related to his sexual orientation and he also witnessed a rampant revolutionary homophobia. Arenas, like thousands of other young peasants, received ideological training and agricultural trade instruction. According to his autobiography, these students became "los hombres nuevos, los jóvenes comunistas" (73); the new men, the Communist Youth (50). This is the extent of Arenas's political analysis of the period, during which he was heavily indoctrinated. The reader is treated, however, to a rather ribald discussion of misbehavior at the school, presented in an exaggerated style that sets the tone for the rest of the autobiography.

Arenas's depiction of stages in his sexual development reflects the testimonial context of a traditional "coming of age" text. At "La Pantoja," he became not a *pícaro* in training, but a silent eyewitness to picaresque adventures of "hundreds" of fellow students who boldly engaged in homosexual experiences. He was, according to his autobiography, "un adolescente encerrado en un campamento con más de dos mil jóvenes a los cuales no se nos permitía salir a la calle" (71); "one of the adolescents locked up in an encampment, together with over two thousand other young men" (48). He rejected homosexuality because:

Entonces, yo padecía todos los prejuicios típicos de una sociedad machista, exaltados por la Revolución; en aquella escuela desbordada de una virilidad militante no parecía haber espacio para el homosexualismo que, ya desde entonces, era severamente castigado con la expulsión y hasta con el encarcelamiento. (71) [In those days I endured all the prejudices typical of a macho society fired up by the Revolution. In that school, overflowing with virile militancy, there

seemed to be no place for homosexuality, which, even then, was severely punished by expulsion and even jail. (trans. 48)]

He was, however, attempting to survive. Not wanting to go back to a crowded home in a rural city, Arenas pretended to have accepted the revolutionary codes of behavior of the so-called "new man." Like many others, he concealed his homosexuality:

... desde luego, no fui yo solo quien supo ocultar su homosexualidad y su rechazo al comunismo; muchos alumnos que eran homosexuales se las arreglaron para sobrevivir; otros, sencillamente, se negaron a sí mismos. (73) [I was, naturally, not the only one who managed to hide his homosexuality and his rejection of communism. Many of the students who were homosexual managed to survive; others simply denied their orientation. (trans. 50)]

Others challenged the sexual restrictions at "La Pantoja," as Arenas documented in the plainly entitled chapter, "A Student." He portrays them as *pícaros* in both their mischievous behavior and their resistance to social norms. Arenas denounces the school's power-structure in his claims of the professors' sexual misbehavior and their abuse of power: "Algunos profesores, por no decir la mayoría, tenían sus relaciones sexuales con los alumnos. . ." (74); ["Some of the professors, if not the majority, had sexual encounters with their students" (trans. 50)]. It is clear that the faculty seemed immune to punishment. Arenas claims that one of them had had sex with over one hundred students. Another teacher had such a dynamic sexual life that students lined up outside the instructor's bedroom, in Arenas's frank and crude language, "to fuck him" (51).

His last incredible example is that of more than hundreds of students who risked getting caught outside the school grounds, in Arenas's uncensored language, "para templarse a un maricón que venía todas las noches caminando desde Holguín a recibir a sus pretendientes" (74); ["to fuck a queer who came on foot from Holguín to take care of his suitors" (51)].

These episodes can be taken as a prelude to Arenas's transformation into a highly sexualized antihero in numerous episodes, carefully documented, of his underground adventures as a youth in Havana. As I state in my book, *Cuba's Political and Sexual Outlaw: Reinaldo Arenas*, he arrived in Havana as a semi-literate student, one of thousands

of young peasants on a full scholarship. Although Arenas had started course work in farm administration at the University of Havana, he gave up that hated career on smelly farms for his childhood passion: literature. This was an odd choice for a peasant who, according to his autobiography, had taken part in the massive nationalization of land properties, one of the first socialist projects in 1961.

In 1963, at age 20, Arenas was in Havana to receive advanced university training in farm management; however, he started to work at the National Library in the Children's Literature department. In 1965 Arenas published his first short stories in Cuba, followed by a novel, *Celestino antes del alba* (1967). A second novel, *El mundo alucinante*, was censored and refused publication in Cuba. This started a period of his smuggling out manuscripts, first *El mundo alucinante* and later another novel, *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*, which were published first in French translation by the reputable publishing house Editions du Seuil. That international fame led, according to his autobiography, to his incarceration in 1974 after entrapment as a corruptor of minors. Arenas was released from the Morro Prison in early January, 1976. According to his statement in *Before Night Falls*, he was freed because after torture he had agreed to write a confession in which he stated that his literary work was produced with a counterrevolutionary intention. He also agreed to stop writing and engaging in homosexual activities. He did not fulfill either promise.

As a good *pícaro*, Arenas's marginal existence after his release from prison is similar to that of the antihero's aimless life, always struggling to make ends meet. This is the last period in his development as an outlaw, as detailed in the chapters "Out on the Street" and "The Monserrate Hotel" of *Before Night Falls*. The passages are careful accounts of multiple encounters with police agents, with friends suspected of being police informants, and with disgruntled lovers. The events are described in Arenas's characteristic "exuberant, sophisticated black humor," in the words of his good friend Juan Abreu, who had witnessed some of Arenas's struggles to survive during his last years in Cuba (*Inferno* 16).

His four-year period in Cuba as a former prisoner displays a strong connection with the picaresque. Like the traditional *pícaro*, Arenas underwent numerous, varied experiences, and he suffered severe economic need. In his autobiography, he did not document fully his deprivations, but he wrote extensively about picaresque characters

marginal outcasts with whom he shared incredible adventures that speak of human ingenuity to escape sexual frustration and economic want.

After his release from prison and his discharge from his job at the UNEAC, the Writer's Guild, Arenas became a social outcast who was surviving by means of menial and illegal activities. He struggled beyond the margins of the law to make ends meet, living in a run-down building and continuing his sexual escapades. He was building *barbacoas*, crude wooden mezzanine platforms that created extra space in crowded Havana apartments, and selling in the booming black market merchandise sent by his friends abroad.

In the chapter "Hotel Monserrate" he writes of his last dwelling in Havana, a run-down former hotel turned into apartments. He documents the dwellers of this unusual building, inhabited mainly by prostitutes, describing them in negative terms:

Aquello era una verdadera fauna que vivía allí al margen de la ley; si la policía venía, lo único que tenía que hacer era poner una reja en la puerta de entrada del edificio, que era la única que había, y todo el mundo quedaba preso. (263) [It was a real jungle on the far side of the law. If the cops came, they would just have to put bars on the entrance to the building, the only way in or out, to turn the whole place into a jail. (trans. 240)]

This chapter, in traditional picaresque style, introduces the reader to so-called dregs of society. In Arenas's account of the ills of the Monserrate building, presumably a microcosm of Havana's lower classes, there was no "upper class" other than the police agents that sometimes came to check up on Arenas. The incredible array of these marginal residents makes up a long series of mini-stories that document the characters' often antagonistic interactions with each other. At the center is Arenas, the ultimate *pícaro*, who must master these characters' tactics for survival.

In conclusion, Arenas's *Before Night Falls* exhibits a didactic undertone similar to that of the picaresque novel in its development of an antihero as a spokesperson for social outlaws. The traditional picaresque presented criticism of many characters in positions of power, who appear as caricatures in a two-faced society. Arenas took a step further in the use of testimonial elements. In a bold decision, he broke the code of silence (of the *pícaro* as a truant) and revealed the identity of many of his autobiography's characters. As an HIV-positive gay

man, writing an autobiography three years before his suicide, he dwelled on the open violation of his human rights and of those of other gay intellectuals. It was his bold choice to flaunt a queer activism, not likely to be acceptable in many countries with specific laws against certain sexual acts. This is Arenas's controversial defense of his attraction to and engagement in sexual relations with his numerous "bellísimo adolescents;" "very beautiful adolescents."

Did Arenas successfully complement with his autobiography's agenda his campaign against the Cuban Revolution's rejection of gay men? One may argue that Arenas's enthusiasm for picaresque adventure often overshadowed his preoccupation with politics. Arenas's autobiographical focus is not an in-depth examination of revolutionary events as one might expect from such a vocal anti-Castro activist. The autobiography is mainly his well-defined self-portrait as a gay and counterrevolutionary mischief-maker in the guise of a young sexual *pícaro*. Arenas made himself the protagonist of a long series of detailed adventures in time periods that cover his childhood, his adolescence, his youth, and his mature years.

Thus, Arenas updated the image of the *pícaro* as a member of a destitute social class (Negrán 30), transforming the traditional profile of an outlaw character (Pellón & Rodríguez-Luis 9) into a louder, "tell it all" kind of activist, who, unlike the traditional antihero, reveals in depth information about his "illegal" sexual encounters, and controversially, the names of those involved in these adventures. This transformation, from a "silent" *pícaro*, as evidenced in his youthful years at "La Pantoja," to a "loud" gay activist who chose to pursue his sexual preference in spite of cultural or police controls, is one of Arenas's greatest contributions to the emerging genre of the gay autobiography in Latin America.

Notes

¹ One last important biographical contribution from Gómez Carriles as co-scriptwriter for the film is that Arenas had heard from him for the first time "Al partir," an 1887 poem by Mexican Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera. According to Arenas's good friend José Abreu, Arenas's final wishes were that his cremated ashes be scattered on Havana's malecón, after the reading of "Al partir." But only after Cuba is free.

² I quote from Arenas's works published in Spanish, indicated by page number. When an English translation is available, it is quoted with the page number indicated as "trans." All other translations are my own.

³ Dolores Koch was to become Arenas's translator into English. It was she who graciously provided this information via email, on November 10, 2008.

⁴ Quotations from letters to and from Reinaldo Arenas from the Reinaldo Arenas Collection (CO 232) in the Princeton University Library, quoted by box and folder. Box 5, folder 6.

⁵ Box 23, folder 7.

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A Gender Enigma

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1. Introduction

One of the challenges in learning Spanish as a second language is the acquisition of gender agreement. Spanish marks gender morphologically on nouns: final vowel *-o* (e.g., *gat-o* 'cat') is the canonical mark for masculine gender and final vowel *-a* (e.g., *gat-a* 'cat'), the canonical mark for feminine gender. Gender agreement is also marked overtly on nominal determinants and modifiers, as shown in (1):

- (1) a. *el gato bonito*
'the (masc) cat (masc) pretty (masc)'
the pretty cat
- b. *la gata bonita*
'the (fem) cat (fem) pretty (fem)'
the pretty cat
- c. *el lince elegante*
'the (masc) lynx elegant'
the elegant lynx

We can see in example (1a) that the masculine determiner *el* 'the' and the masculine modifier *bonito* 'pretty' agree with the masculine noun *gato* 'cat.' Similarly, in example (1b) the feminine determiner *la* 'the' and the feminine adjective *bonita* 'pretty' agree with the feminine noun *gata* 'cat.' Finally, example (1c) illustrates the masculine nominal *lince* 'lynx' and the adjective *elegante* 'elegant' that are not canonically marked for gender. In Spanish nominals and adjectives ending in *-e* or a consonant, could be either masculine or feminine, e.g., *la lech-e* 'the (fem) milk (fem)'. Nonetheless, the masculine determiner *el* 'the,'