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| **Arlt, Roberto (1900-1942)** |
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| Roberto Arlt was an Argentine novelist, playwright, journalist, travel writer, and short-story writer. Recognized in recent decades as a foundational figure of modern literature in Argentina and Latin America, during his lifetime he was regarded as an outsider among writers. Arlt began to acquire a prominent status in Latin American literature in the 1960s, thanks to several young writers and critics who noted a significant precedent in his confrontational prose, as well as for his transgressive treatment of the power dynamics and cultural issues associated with the rise of modern urban societies. |
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His parents arrived to Argentina during the waves of immigration sponsored by government policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; his father was from Austria and his mother from Trieste. While in 1870 Buenos Aires had a middling population of roughly 180,000 inhabitants, the number of residents had ballooned to more than a million and a half by 1918. Along with the economic growth and rapid modernization, the city experienced increased social inequality and urban destitution. Arlt incorporated the marginal figures affected by the violence of this urban upheaval as prototypes for his novels’ disaffected and alienated characters.  At age sixteen Arlt dropped out of school and became a bohemian factotum and autodidact.  He spent his young adulthood working in manual labor in different cities around Argentina until 1924, when he, his wife and his newborn daughter returned to Buenos Aires. Arlt worked as a full-time journalist for newspapers in the city, first as a crime reporter, and later with his own successful column at the newspaper *El Mundo*, where he took a job in 1929. Sponsored by that newspaper, he traveled to Brazil and Uruguay in 1930, and later to Spain in 1935. Roberto Arlt died of a stroke on July 26, 1942.  Arlt’s first, strictly literary publication was an essay entitled ‘Las ciencias ocultas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires’ [‘The occult sciences in the city of Buenos Aires’], published in 1920. His first novel, *El juguete rabioso* [*Mad Toy*] was published in 1926. A semi-autobiographical work, the novel narrates the failures and misadventures of its picaresque protagonist in Buenos Aires’ poor neighborhoods. Described by critics as a sort of Bildungsroman, Arlt’s first novel stands out for its use of common speech, Buenos Aires’ urban slang or *lunfardo*, and for its treatment of the urban environment populated by the port city’s most destitute figures. The use of *lunfardo* and disjointed Spanish syntax were a constant in Arlt’s prose; though they also impeded the internationalization of his works, given the difficulty inherent in translating the idiosyncrasies of the urban slang.  Arlt’s importance and legacy have been cemented around his novelistic production. During his lifetime, however, he was better known for his journalistic endeavors, and for his activities as a playwright. Once Arlt had a permanent position as a staffer in the newspaper *El Mundo*, he published a popular series of chronicles about urban life, politics, and culture of Buenos Aires. He titled these types of chronicles ‘Aguafuertes’, and in 1933 he collected them in an edition and published them under the title *Aguafuertes porteñas* [*Etchings from Buenos Aires*] (1933). Following the success of these chronicles, the newspaper asked him to write the same kind of texts during his trip to Spain. He collected them, too, and published them as *Aguafuertes españolas* [*Etchings from Spain*] in 1936. In the early 1930s Arlt was also asked by theatre practitioner Leónidas Barletta to write plays for his new project, *Teatro del pueblo* [‘The People’s Theatre’]. As a result, the two collaborated for almost a decade, with Arlt writing the plays and Barletta as producer. Arlt’s plays staged by Barletta’s theatre were: *Trescientos millones* [*Three hundred million*] (1932), *Saverio el cruel* [*Saverio the Cruel*] (1936) *El fabricante de fantasmas* [*The Ghost Maker*] (1936) *África* (1938) and *La fiesta del hierro* [*The Iron Party*].  In 1929, Arlt published what many now consider his masterpiece, the novel *Los siete locos* [*Seven Madmen*]. A sequel, *Los Lanzallamas* [*The Flame-Throwers*], was published in 1931. His last novel, *Amor brujo* [*Bewitching Love*], was published in 1932. Arlt also published two volumes of short stories, *El jorobadito* in 1933 *[The Little Hunchback]* and *El criador de gorilas* in 1941 *[The Gorilla Handler].* Arlt’s novels and short stories are set in urban Argentina, and are characterized by the extreme conditions (social, moral, economic, psychological) and obsessions of their characters, which often are resolved by their death or violent circumstances. These kind of characters portray the modern individual’s search for a stable identity in the midst of a liquid urban milieu. Arlt’s literary voice was, as he put it, socially rather than aesthetically committed. However, in his novels his political stance is often ambiguous and playful, emphasizing instead a radical search for transcendence through artistic and social transgression. Arlt’s style relies on an astute and transgressive mixture of registers to evoke the heterogeneity, excitement, and violence of modern life. Due to his experience as a journalist, at times Arlt’s prose resembles the style of crime reports, and the thrill and cruelty of the situations he narrates in his writings resemble the sensationalism of these reports as well. Selected WorksNovels *(1926) El juguete rabioso.*  (1929) *Los siete locos.*  (1931) *Los lanzallamas.*  *(1932) El amor brujo.* Plays (1932) Trescientos millones  (1932) Prueba de amor.  (1934) Un hombre sensible  (1934) La juerga de las polichinelas  (1936) El fabricante de fantasmas  (1936) Saverio el cruel  (1938) África  (1938) La isla desierta  (1940) La fiesta del hierro  (1942) El desierto entra a la ciudad Short Stories (1933) El jorobadito  (1941) El criador de gorilas Journalism (1933) Aguafuertes porteñas  (1936) Aguafuertes españolas.  Works Translated *Mad Toy* (1926) trans. from the Spanish by Michelle McKay Aynesworth, Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2002.  *The Seven Madmen* (1929) trans. from the Spanish by Naomi Lindstrom, Boston: David R. Godine Publishers, 1984.  *The Seven Madmen* (1998), trans. Nick Caistor, London: Serpent's Tail. |
| Further reading:  (Arlt, Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas)  (Arlt, Obra completa (Complete Works))  (Borré)  (Capdevila, A; Galán, A.S. (eds))  (Flint)  (Piglia)  (Sarlo) |