

PROLOGUE

“The Will to Live Manifesting Itself”

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The Poem: A Poetics in Action

Poema es lo que queda después del derrumbe,
más allá del incendio: resistencia al golpe, reto al horror.

[The poem is what is left after the collapse,
in the wake of the fire: withstanding blows, defying horror.]

Reinaldo Arenas, *Desgarramiento y fatalidad en la poesía cubana*

Reinaldo Arenas's poetry is best studied as a part of his entire output and as a function of the place the author confers upon the work of art in society. It is significant that Reinaldo Arenas is known more as a novelist than as a poet, despite lyrical language's prominent place in his stylistic arsenal. Almost his whole oeuvre is saturated with poetic time, a magic and unreal time, which lends his writing an air of irreverence and audacity in its reading of Cuban reality before and after the 1959 Revolution. Arenas has stated that poetry is central to him and to his vision of literature: “And one must not make poetry into a genre, but simply a literary necessity” [“Y no debe hacerse de la poesía un género, sino sencillamente una necesidad literaria”] (Soto, *Conversación* 60).¹ As our objective is to provide a coherent study of Arenas's poetic works, we must shed light on the value the poet gave to poetry, why and how he used poetic language throughout his work in general. His literary production as a whole (short stories, novels, novellas, plays, essays, and poetry) can be read as an extended single text in which characters, themes, tones, and motifs are repeated constantly even as they introduce variations.²

Here one can see how the poet saw art (creative imagination) specifically as a

force promoting a human being's life-affirming expression. Arenas's poetics centers on the author's conception of expression as a life force, the function of art as a vehicle to achieve freedom, and the work itself as a re-creation of the true human condition. In his essay "The Sea Is Our Jungle and Our Hope" ["El mar es nuestra selva y nuestra esperanza"], Arenas states that

there can be no creation where there is no freedom. All works of art are tacitly shows of rebellion, antagonistic acts, protests in the far-reaching sense of the term. Freedom is as necessary for the artist as air or time. . . . The writer is a being who confabulates and dreams. The outcome of these visitations, plus the discipline and rigor applied in untangling and expressing them, will be his work. For me creation is a balancing act between madness and life, nightmare and dream, stupefying inertia and the incoherent howl. Creating is an act of innocence, a game.

[no puede haber creación donde no hay libertad. Toda obra de arte es tácitamente una manifestación de rebeldía, una actividad antagónica, una protesta en el sentido trascendente del término. La libertad es tan necesaria para el artista como el aire o el tiempo. . . . El escritor es un ser que fabula y sueña. El producto de estas visitaciones, más la disciplina y el rigor con que trata de desenmarañarlas y expresarlas, será su obra. Para mi la creación es un equilibrio entre la locura y la vida, entre la pesadilla y el sueño, entre la estupidizante inercia y el aullido incoherente. Crear es un acto de inocencia; un juego.] (*Necesidad de libertad* 29)

These three conceptions (*self-expression as a life force, art as a vehicle, and the work of art as a bastion of truth*) provide the impetus for an aesthetically rich work that also defines an ethics and a politics. Arenas himself declares that "writing (creating) is an act of irreverence, ethically as well as stylistically" ["escribir (crear) es un acto de irreverencia, tanto en lo ético como lo estilístico"] (*Necesidad de libertad* 210). For Reinaldo Arenas, aesthetics, ethics, and justice are inextricably linked. At the heart of these three dimensions lies creative imagination, which takes shape in the poem and is perpetuated in the readers' endless readings. For Arenas, poetry is what transforms the mundane into the beautiful, terror into reverent love, and apathy into an experience of union. Arenas proposes that poetry can be a repository of the true human condition. He extracts poetic—revealed—truths from the uncouth and painful, placing before our gaze the sublimity and sacredness of human life. Works of imagination entail action and commitment. As Arenas notes: "For all art is above all the highest manifestation of freedom, and freedom is not a gift from the heavens but a right earned through action." ["Porque todo arte es ante todo la más alta manifestación de libertad y la libertad no es un don del cielo sino un derecho que se gana a través de la acción."] ³

NO ONE SHOULD BE ALARMED IF THIS AFTERNOON

No one should be alarmed if this afternoon
in which the sky is burning like my soul is burning,
I am lost amid the harsh groves
or a silk-engirdled dragon gulps me down.

Right out in the street and as reasonable as you please
the monster will fulfill his obligation.

And you all will carry on with clumsy gait
no matter if I stay or if I'm lost.

No matter if I stay or if I perish,
no matter if I perish though I stay,
no matter if I perish and don't stay.

This is the sentence I deserve
for my living in a place where *you're never allowed*
and for not giving a damn for the place itself.

(*Havana, 1976*)

NADIE SE HABRÁ DE ALARMAR SI EN ESTA TARDE

Nadie se habrá de alarmar si en esta tarde
en que arde el cielo como mi alma arde,
me pierdo entre las hoscas arboledas
o me engulle un dragón envuelto en sedas.

En plena calle y con muy buen sentido
el monstruo cumplirá su cometido.

Y ustedes seguirán con paso lerdo
lo mismo si me quedo o si me pierdo.

Lo mismo si me quedo o si perezco,
lo mismo si perezco aunque me quede,
lo mismo si perezco y no me quedo.

Tal es la sentencia que merezco
por habitar un sitio donde *jamás se puede*
y no importarme el mismo sitio un bledo.

(*La Habana, 1976*)