

LITERARY TEXT'S FREEDOM AND ITS ENCOUNTER WITH THE READER

A liberdade do texto literário e o seu encontro com o leitor

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RESUMO: Há um paralelismo entre a condição humana e a obra de arte que concede subjetividade à última. Assim, George Steiner é capaz de falar da liberdade de criação na obra de arte, um encontro de liberdades, por assim dizer, uma cortesia da obra em si. Por meio dessa metáfora, o tradutor e o leitor tornam-se anfitriões equiparando a relação do homem com os dicionários àquela dos habitantes de uma cidade. Neste artigo, alguns trabalhos em prosa do escritor mexicano Juan José Arreola serão examinados nessa perspectiva. Os textos curtos de *Bestiário* (1959) geralmente expõem-se claramente como uma tal cortesia para com o leitor e nos levam a ver quão próximos são esses encontros na vida humana— com pessoas ou obras de arte— e o quanto iluminam um ao outro.

Palavras-chave: liberdade da obra de arte, cortesia, polidez, bestiário, racionalidade

ABSTRACT: There is a structural parallelism between human condition and artwork that allows attributing subjectivity to the latter. On this basis George Steiner is able to speak of a freedom of the artwork, an encounter between freedoms, an artwork's courtesy. Through this metaphor the translator and the reader become hosts and our relationship with dictionaries becomes like that of dwellers in a city. In this article some prose works of the Mexican writer Juan José Arreola will be scanned under this light. The short texts of his *Bestiario* (1959) often clearly show such a courtesy towards the reader and lead to see how such encounters of our lives—with a person and with an artwork—are close, and how strongly they enlighten each other.

Keywords: artwork's freedom, courtesy, politeness, bestiary, relationality

What we must focus, with
uncompromising clarity, on the text,
on the work of art, on the music
before us, is an ethic of common
sense, a courtesy of the most robust
and refined sort.

(STEINER, 1989, p. 149)

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1. Two freedoms

My main argument lies on the thesis that there is a freedom in the artwork and therefore our encounter with it is an encounter between two freedoms. This is a very strong thesis, explicitly held by George Steiner in *Real Presences*:

Where freedoms meet, where the integral liberty of donation or withholding of the work of art encounters our own liberty of reception or refusal, *cortesia*, what I have called tact of heart, is of the essence. (STEINER, 1989, p. 155)

The first interpretation of such meeting consists of identifying the freedom of artwork with that of the author. This is partially sound, but there seems to be no consensus among authors with the idea that spectators are going to meet them. What matters is the artwork.

Authors and interpreters witness the fact that they cannot do with the work everything they desire. For example, characters of a novel have their own profile; a pianist playing a piece has to adjust to a truth that belongs to the work.

2. Human condition

I find the best way to explain the parallelism between human person and artwork in two texts by Octavio Paz and Luigi Pareyson. Paz describes the human condition as follows:

Our condition doesn't identify with anything of whom it incarnates in, but at the same time it only exists incarnating in anything that isn't itself. (PAZ, 1956, p. 193)ⁱ

Pareyson presents the relationship between artwork and its interpretation in such a way that we are able to recognize the human condition in it. He asserts that the work of art is

inseparable from the performance that gives it life and at the same time irreducible to each one of its performances. (PAREYSON, 1971, p. 71)ⁱⁱ

This is the basis of the person-like condition of a work of art. Steiner speaks of “integral liberty of donation or withholding of the work of art”; that is, I have a freedom in front of me, and have my “own liberty of reception or refusal”. It's like an encounter between two people, it's a place “where freedoms meet”, Steiner says. Therefore it's pertinent, still more, it is “essential”, speaking of “*cortesia*, [of] tact of heart”. It is also a matter of rhetorics.

In the entire book (*Real Presences*) we never find the word “politeness”. When Steiner writes “cortesia” or “courtesy” (he uses both) we can understand not only the good behavior of the court but also the entire field of politeness.

3. Juan José Arreola: *Bestiario*

Juan José Arreola was a Mexican writer and a master of writers. Very important writers learnt to write under his mentoring, for example winners of Cervantes Prize such as Carlos Fuentes, José Emilio Pacheco and Sergio Pitol, and winners of Prize Prince of Asturias such as Augusto Monterroso and once again Carlos Fuentes. Arreola was famous for his short texts (not always stories) and for his spoken language. Among his short texts, there are some that I find especially meaningful as they respond to the phenomenon of the two freedoms. They are the ones from *Bestiario*, a collection with 23 descriptions of animals, according to the wellknown literary genre “bestiary”

I’m aware that all what I’m going to say, or much of it, very probably could be obtained through other methodologies. However, what matters is the possibility to analyze a text by searching for the tracks of the freedoms.

4. Courtesy, reticence

Steiner enumerates acts of courtesy (“ceremonies of reciprocal perception”) in a characterization of translation:

Translation comprises complex exercises of salutation, of reticence, of commerce between cultures, between tongues and modes of saying (STEINER, 1989, p. 146)

There are several reticences or figures that express hesitation in *Bestiario*ⁱⁱⁱ, for example the rectification in the description of the toad. The hop is characterized as the beat of the heart and then is added: “In fact, a toad is all heart” (p. 4).^{iv} The owl is described with the vocabulary of cognitive philosophy: “The *thing in itself* (rodent, reptile, of flying creature) surrenders to him in some unfathomable way. Perhaps through the invisible claw-swipe of an instantaneous intuition” (p. 15).^v

The description of the elephant has two enchainned changes of direction. “How many years ago did the elephant lose its hair? Instead of trying to figure it out, let’s all go to the circus and pretend we are grandchildren of the elephant (...) ... No. Let’s talk instead about ivory” (p. 16).^{vi}

The text about the hyena has even three reticences in the form of reluctance and interruption. In these cases the phenomenon is related to the disgusting nature of the subject. “The hyena should be described rapidly, almost cursorily” (p. 24).^{vii} Then: “The silver point resists to accept and sketches only with difficulty...” (*ibid.*)^{viii} And then: “One moment. We must also record some of the criminal’s essential traits” (*ibid.*).^{ix}

One case more, in the form of regret. The great mass of the hippopotamus offers the idea of modeling many little animals of a pair of medium-sized ones. “But no. The hippopotamus persists just as he is” (p. 20).^x

This is not exactly the reticence Steiner means. He speaks about the approximation^{xi} of the translator to the text (or that of the reader, as there is always a translation). It’s the dynamics of trial and error. But in any case these reticences create an initiative in the text, the change is an evidence of the choice for us. No mechanical process of understanding is possible – we have to try, with the *tact of heart*:

Once more, the issue is one of the *cortesia* which perception owes, though always with self-questioning scruple, to common sense. (STEINER, 1989, p. 171)

This scruple is something special in the case of Arreola. He had in life a scrupulous profile. An example of it is the story called “Una reputación” (pp. 74-77)^{xii}, whose protagonist could be Arreola himself.

5. Some descriptions – The Rhinoceros

Let us systematically follow at least one description. “The Rhinoceros” begins *in medias res*. The beast was in the middle of a run, as the text starts: “The rhinoceros comes to a halt” (p. 4).^{xiii} And it continues:

He raises his head. He backs up a bit. Then he wheels in a circle and fires his artillery piece. Furious and blind, a battering ram, he charges like an armored bull with a lone horn, with the single-minded vigor of a positivist philosopher. (*ibid.*)^{xiv}

His actions are described with a vocabulary that sounds quite normal for the movements of an animal, but suddenly the operations become mechanical when it's said "fires": the terminology is that of weapons and machines:

He never hits the target, but he remains perpetually pleased with his strength. Then he opens his escape valves and snorts full steam. (*ibid.*)^{xv}

The acceptance of likenesses and metaphors belongs to every literary text and corresponds to the "commerce between cultures, between tongues and modes of saying" (STEINER, 1989, p. 146) which Steiner speaks about. The specificity of his approach is the attribution of a courtesy between the artwork and the every one of us (i.e. the reader). Such commerce comes in a context of courtesy. He is speaking of "ceremonies of reciprocal perception" (*ibid.*). After our salutation (cf. *ibid.*) and acceptance we are able to understand and enjoy the rhinoceros as a beast, as an engine, as a big gun, as a philosopher. (A positivist one. Positivism was the official philosophy in Mexico in the early 20th century.)^{xvi} Furthermore, the rhinoceros is at the same time gun and projectile, the charge is discharge.

Then the terminology changes again and becomes that of geology and iron industry:

Now in captivity, the rhinoceros is a melancholy, rusty beast. His multiplied body was armed during prehistoric landslides with laminations of coarse hide and stamped under the pressure of geological strata (*ibid.*)^{xvii}

After this accumulation of iron, strata, rust, it arrives, with an initial addition of dryness, a strongly contrasting jump from mineral to living kingdom:

But in a special moment during the morning the rhinoceros startles us: from his dry, gaunt flanks, like water from the rocky cleft, springs the great organ of torrential and potent life. It repeats the horn motif of the beast's head, with variations of the orchid, the assegai, and the halberd. (*ibid.*)^{xviii}

After the jump from dust to water, the variations of the horn come back to the weapons through the likeness of the flower: from the orchid to a pair of old lances with such florid shapes.

6. The Elephant, the ivory

“The elephant” has an inference that requires our goodwill to function:

It seems colossal because it is constructed only with living cells and endowed with intelligence and memory. (p. 16)^{xix}

What is the connection between being constructed with living cells and seeming colossal? There is a pair of lines that refer to many allusions. The two already mentioned reticences are followed by the invitation to talk about ivory:

That noble substance, hard and uniform, which pachyderms secretly push with all their body’s might, like a material expression of thought. (*ibid.*)^{xx}

It seems like an application of the Boyle-Mariotte law: the correlation between pressure, density and time. Moreover, the allusions to mathematical physics continues:

The ivory, which protrudes from the head and develops in the vacuum two curved, bright stalactites. (*ibid.*)^{xxi}

It comes out from the head, the same as with the thought. In Spanish “curvas” is an adjective for “estalactitas”, but in this position before reading what is coming, one can understand “curvas” like a substantive, “two curves”, what combines very well with the verb “develop” to have a geometrical subject, with the cooperation of the space for the curves, the “vacuum”. Furthermore, the second adjective, “despejadas”, contributes to the technical vocabulary. The meaning here is ‘free’, ‘without touching anything’, ‘without leaning on any other support’. If we have understood “curves” in a geometrical way, then we easily understand “despejar” as the solving of an equation (when an unknown becomes known by the solution of the equation).

7. Rhetoric – The Ostrich

These meeting points of meanings have to do with rhetoric. Steiner writes:

There is a part of rhetoric in every communicative act and visitation. Rhetoric is the craft of charging with significant effect the lexical and grammatical units of utterance. A statue, a building, have their rhetoric of self-presentment. So does the sound-structure and projection in a piece of music. (STEINER, 1989, p. 160)

This “charging with significant effect” is evident in the quotes I have read from the rhino and the elephant. We find a similar operation in the description of the ostrich. Its neck is “like the pipe of a profane organ” (p. 8).^{xxii} The ostrich is “doubtless the prime example of the shortest skirt and the most plunging neckline” (*ibid.*).^{xxiii} At the beginning, we read that it “proclaims to the four winds the radical nakedness of ornate flesh” (*ibid.*).^{xxiv}

The image is very ridiculous. Let’s think of the appeal of such legs and such breast (chicken breast...). The likeness functions with the presupposition of a sensitivity, that of frivolity, of unnecessary lavishness, that of fripperies. An ostrich-like way of life follows this model: the ostrich “puts on its finery but always leaves the own intimate ugliness uncovered” (*ibid.*).^{xxv} It’s the certainty of a beauty that probably doesn’t exist.

8. Goodwill – The Toad, the Bear

The presupposition of certain sensitivity is needed here, but also our goodwill of recognizing it, of seeing the ostrich like this and of seeing some people like ostriches. The correspondence is never automatic and never complete. It depends on our freedom and on the freedom instilled in the artwork. Steiner writes:

The congruence is never complete. It is never uniform with its object. If it was, the act of reception would be wholly equivalent to that of original enunciation. Our guest would have nothing to bring us. (STEINER, 1989, p. 175)

The description of the toad, very short, follows a series of comparisons: the toad like a heart – the toad (un)like a butterfly – the toad like a sphinx – the toad like me (cf. p. 4).^{xxvi}

Sometimes the best invitation to our goodwill is the assertion of something as if it were quite evident:

No woman would refuse to give birth to a little bear cub. (p. 13)^{xxvii}

9. Approximation (to a Lion)

Politeness approximates all of us to each other, but as far as the approximation regards persons, the criterion of validity isn't the "amount" of nearness. Steiner says:

Where there is *cortesia* between freedoms, a vital distance is kept. A certain reserve persists. Understanding is patiently won and, at all times, provisional. There are questions we do not ask of our 'caller', of the summoner's presence in the poem or the music, lest they diminish both the object of our questioning and ourselves. (STEINER, 1989, p. 176)

Let's finish with a short story that doesn't belong to *Bestiario* but includes an animal. The story has a title in German: "Achtung! Lebende Tiere" – "Warning! Living Animals!"

The story is very simple. I have purposely chosen a text not so full of evident jokes. If we accept the assumptions that give life to the text (and hopefully the text is willing to donate), there will be an interaction of goodwills that could allow the understanding even when the story diverts. At the end of it, a light story opens doors to food for thought, that is, to a philosophical and existential question of all times.

Once there was a tiny girl who got into lots of mischief at the zoo. She got in the cages of sleeping beasts and pulled^{xxviii} their tails. The brusque awakening of these ferocious animals was all that saved her as she scampered away, escaping.

But one day the little girl came across a gaunt, solitary lion who had lost his former prestige and paid no attention to her. The girl^{xxix} abandoned tail pulling and tried stronger measures. She began to tickle the sleeping lion and stirred up one by one all the ideas in his mane. When, with a total lack of reflexes, he failed to respond, she proclaimed herself a lion tamer in a loud voice. The beast then gently turned his head and gobbled her up in one bite.

The zoo officials had a bad time of it because it came out in all the newspapers. The commentators yelled bloody murder and criticized the laws of the universe which allow hungry lions to exist next to incompatible, mischievous^{xxx} little girls. (p. 44)

10. Appendix

Achtung! Lebende Tiere

Había una vez una niña chiquita, chiquita, que daba mucha lata en el zoológico. Se metía en la jaula de las bestias dormidas y les tiraba la cola. El brusco despertar de los feroces era precisamente la salvación de la criatura que se escapaba corriendo.

Pero un día la niña fue a dar con un león flaco, desprestigiado y solitario que no se dio por aludido. La niña abandonó los tirones de cola y pasó a mayores. Se puso a hacerle cosquillas al dormido y le revolvió una por una todas las ideas de la melena. Ante aquella total ausencia de reflejos, se proclamó en voz alta domadora de leones. La fiera volvió entonces dulcemente la cabeza y se tragó a la niña de un solo bocado.

Las autoridades del zoológico pasaron un mal rato porque la noticia salió en todos los periódicos. Los comentaristas pusieron el grito en el cielo y criticaron las leyes del universo, que consienten la existencia de leones hambrientos junto a incompatibles niñas maleducadas. (B, p. 68)

The Toad

He hops from time to time just to prove his radical immobility. The hop is rather like a heartbeat; rightly seen^{xxxii}, a toad is all heart.

Pressed in a block of cold mud, the toad submerges himself in the winter like a pitiful chrysalis. He awakens in the spring, conscious that no metamorphosis has taken place. In his profound state of desiccation he is more of a toad than ever. Silently he awaits the first rains.

One fine day he emerges from the soft earth, heavy with humidity, swollen with rancorous juices, looking like a heart that has been flung to the ground. In the attitude of this living sphinx there is a secret offer to exchange^{xxxiii}, and the toad's ugliness presents itself to our eyes with the oppressive quality of a mirror. (p. 4)

El sapo

Salta de vez en cuando, sólo para comprobar su radical estático. El salto tiene algo de latido: viéndolo bien, el sapo es todo corazón.

Prensado en un bloque de lodo frío, el sapo se sumerge en el invierno como una lamentable crisálida. Se despierta en primavera, consciente de que ninguna metamorfosis se ha operado en él. Es más sapo que nunca, en su profunda desecación. Aguarda en silencio las primeras lluvias.

Y un buen día surge de la tierra blanda, pesado de humedad, henchido de savia rencorosa, como un corazón tirado al suelo. En su actitud de esfinge hay una secreta proposición de canje, y la fealdad del sapo aparece ante nosotros con una abrumadora cualidad de espejo. (B, p.13)

11. Bibliography

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ⁱ “Nuestra condición consiste en no identificarse con nada de aquello en que encarna, sí, pero también en no existir sino encarnando en lo que no es ella misma”.

ⁱⁱ “È evidente che un rapporto del genere non si può configurare nei termini di soggetto e oggetto: né l’interprete è un ‘soggetto’ che dissolva l’opera nel proprio atto o che debba spersonalizzarsi per rendere fedelmente l’opera in sé stessa, ma è piuttosto una ‘persona’ che sa servirsi della propria sostanza storica e della propria insostituibile attività e iniziativa per penetrare l’opera nella sua realtà e farla vivere della sua vita; né l’opera è un ‘oggetto’ a cui l’interprete debba adeguare la propria rappresentazione dall’esterno, essendo essa piuttosto caratterizzata da una ‘inoggettività’, che le deriva dall’essere inseparabile dall’esecuzione che la fa vivere e al tempo stesso irreducibile a ciascuna delle proprie esecuzioni.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Arreola’s quotes in the text are signaled with the page of *Confabulario*, collected works translated by George D. Schade, which includes *Bestiario*. In endnote is quoted as “B” the original text of *Bestiario*, in the 1972 edition. When I change something in the translation, I put in the endnote the translation by Schade.

^{iv} “in fact, if you consider the matter carefully, a toad is all heart” – “viéndolo bien, el sapo es todo corazón” (B, p. 13).

^v “La cosa en sí (roedor, reptil o volátil) se le entrega no sabemos cómo. Tal vez mediante el zarpazo invisible de una intuición momentánea” (B, p. 22).

^{vi} “¿Cuántos años hace que los elefantes perdieron el pelo? En vez de calcular, vámonos todos al circo y juguemos a ser los nietos del elefante (...) ... No. Mejor hablemos del marfil” (B, p. 25).

^{vii} “La descripción de la hiena debe hacerse rápidamente y casi como al pasar” (B, p. 32).

^{viii} “The limner boggles and sketches only with difficulty...” – “La punta de plata se resiste, y fija a duras penas...” (B, p. 32).

^{ix} “Un momento. Hay que tomar también algunas huellas esenciales del criminal” (B, p. 32).

^x “Pero no. El hipopótamo es como es” (B, p. 33).

^{xi} “Our encounter with the freedom of presence in another human being our attempt to communicate with that freedom, will always entail approximation” (STEINER, 1989, p. 175).

^{xii} In Spanish, ARREOLA, 1952, pp. 152-155.

^{xiii} “El gran rinoceronte se detiene” (B, p. 11).

^{xiv} “... materialistic philosopher” – “Alza la cabeza. Recula un poco. Gira en redondo y dispara su pieza de artillería. Embiste como ariete, con un solo cuerno de toro blindado, embravecido y cegato, en arranque total de filósofo positivista” (B, p. 11).

^{xv} “Nunca da en el blanco, pero queda siempre satisfecho de su fuerza. Abre luego sus válvulas de escape y bufa a todo vapor” (B, p. 11).

^{xvi} I think that “furious and blind” are directly linked to “positivist philosopher”. In the original text those adjectives are closer.

^{xvii} “Ya en cautiverio, el rinoceronte es una bestia melancólica y oxidada. Su cuerpo de muchas piezas ha sido armado en los derrumbaderos de la prehistoria, con láminas de cuero troqueladas bajo la presión de los niveles geológicos” (B, p. 11).

^{xviii} “... the javelin, and the shield” – “Pero en un momento especial de la mañana, el rinoceronte nos sorprende: de sus ijares enjutos y resecos, como agua que sale de la hendidura rocosa, brota el gran órgano de vida torrencial y potente, repitiendo en la punta los motivos cornudos de la cabeza animal,

con variaciones de orquídea, de azagaya y alabarda” (B, p. 11). In Schade’s translation (javelin, shield) the allusion to flowers is less evident.

^{xix} “...because it is constructed with pure living cells...” – “Parece colosal porque está construido con puras células vivientes y dotado de inteligencia y memoria” (B, p. 25).

^{xx} “Mejor hablemos del marfil. Esa noble sustancia, dura y uniforme, que los paquidermos empujan secretamente con todo el peso de su cuerpo, como una material expresión de pensamiento” (B, p. 25).

^{xxi} “El marfil, que sale de la cabeza y que desarrolla en el vacío dos curvas y despejadas estalactitas” (B, p. 25).

^{xxii} “como un tubo de órgano profano” (B, p. 17).

^{xxiii} “El mejor ejemplo sin duda para la falda más corta y el escote más bajo” (B, p. 17).

^{xxiv} “...the radical nakedness of flamboyant flesh” – “Proclama a los cuatro vientos la desnudez radical de la carne ataviada” (B, p. 17).

^{xxv} “...leaves the own ugly intimate parts uncovered” – “el ave que se engalana pero que siempre deja la íntima fealdad al descubierto” (B, p. 17).

^{xxvi} B, p. 13. See the entire text in the appendix.

^{xxvii} “ninguna mujer se negaría a dar a luz un osito” (B, p. 23).

^{xxviii} “would get... and pull”.

^{xxix} “child”.

^{xxx} “poorly trained”.

^{xxxi} “in fact, if you consider the matter carefully”.

^{xxxii} “trade”.

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