

A Forgotten Poet: Marcelino Arozarena

Jorge Olivera Castillo
Writer and journalist
Havana, Cuba

Upon delving into the poetic opus of Marcelino Arozarena one can see the influence of a style that definitely left a mark, due to its originality and experimentation. His use of linguistic resources that break with traditional stereotypes places it at the heart of a creative trend that began to make headway during the second decade of the twentieth century. It was at this time that African elements began to break, directly and definitely, onto the national poetry scene. Along with unique figures in this movement, among them white poets Ramón Guirao, José Zacarías Tallet and Emilio Ballagas, one finds two other, dark-skinned Cubans: Nicolás Guillén and Marcelino Arozarena (1912-1996).

Even if the latter's literary and journalistic work was not sufficiently appreciated by many institutions and presses at the time, it is important to note that this poet deserves to be rescued from anonymity right now, when March 13th marked the hundredth anniversary of birth. Arozarena's verses contain much more than language distorted by black Cubans' process of transculturation. In them, one finds a social portrait of a race that ar-

rived in the Caribbean in a condition equal to that of beasts. Once freed from slavery, the descendants of those thousands of men and women torn from the coasts of Africa for over three centuries barely managed to climb the social ladder. Their labor was limited to domestic service in the Creole aristocracy's mansions, and being musicians, tailors, and other things deemed irrelevant by a dominant class unwilling to abandon prejudices inherited from colonial times.

It is impossible not to consider the marginalization and other sources of conflict this kind of coexistence generated, just as Arozarena observed, when he later versified his ideas in a way that touched other edges that were also important in an existentiality that was and is the fundamental basis for survival.

His verses perfectly revealed a tenement house environment, with its uncertain weight. It is from this space, from his humility, that blacks speak in a language conditioned by multiple factors. Each word is a reflection of his identity. One need not sharpen his or her ear to hear and feel the pounding of the drums. First, we have the sensual movements of a group of amateur dancers who take front

and center, and enjoy the contagious sound of the percussion.

Although one might interpret this as a poetics of victimization, this poet wanted only to illuminate a zone that was buried in oblivion, something he achieved after deploying a rhetoric that often confused poetry and prose, and used interjections like adornments that created a finish that if not sublime, was at least essential for the poem to have transcendence at a time when life was darkened by unjustifiable interests or distractions.

Orality and Rhythm in the Poetry of Marcelino Arozarena

Quite a few critics agree that Arozarena's poetry is essentially based on oral tradition, and not on writing, per se. This is obvious when one reads his work, particularly poems that contain notable auditory elements known as *jitanfáforas* [a rhythmic sound riff].¹ This stylistic element, in addition to onomatopoeia and the interjections, are common to the *negrista* poetry that Guillén and Arozarena began to write in 1930.

Rhythm, the use of simple language, and performance are all part of the formal and conceptual roots of a style that included the customs and vicissitudes of a social group that is still facing challenges. They may be less traumatic than those of the first decades of the twentieth century, but still cause one to doubt statements that in the past 50 years of socialist revolution we have really achieved an equality of social, cultural, and labor opportunities. In his poem "Amalia," Arozarena recreated moments of a *bembé*² when a mulatto woman shouts with electrifying sensuality: *jicaras de raspadura/ que cuelgan de sus caderas, tremolando/*

todo el cuerpo temblando/ siguiendo el toque tremendo/ que agarra y amarra el alma con ariques de cintura [calabashes of shaved ice/ that hang from her hips, quivering/ and her whole body trembling/ following the thumping drums/ that grab and tie up the soul with blows of the waist].

Earlier, in "Caridá," the poet used a feminine figure as its center, to immortalize a few of his ancestors cultural references, employing colloquial language marked by spontaneity and a lack of inhibition. Blacks situated at the margins have in Arozarena a voice that personifies a poetics of commitment. Yet, this does not affect its aesthetic quality. Instead, it establishes its place in Cuba's national poetry—far from indifference and trivialization.

If Guillén found some of the inspiration for his style of poetry in the *son*, Arozarena's muses came fundamentally from the drumming of a *rumba* or *guaguancó*. One can appreciate this in his cadence, use of repeated choruses, and other stylistic devices that give his work a touch of their originality. The poem "Cumbele Macumbele," with its fictional poetics and creative drive, is a great example of this tendency:

Chorus:

Tumbaore...

Tumbaore...

Narrator:

*The drums' sharp edge slices daybreak
and the blood of a thick son
leaves a trace of tremors on the skin of the
drums
(...)*

Counterpoint Chorus/Narrator:

*Suddenly, a voices lets loose
Oh, tumbaore, tumbaore*

not fergettin, the roles
--tumbaore—
Take a good look at her neck
at Cumbele's woman
Tumbaore...

Well known, Senegalese poet, Léopold Senghor offers us an interesting definition to help us understand the essence of this poetry of African origin, verses in which rhythm and not only part of but actually the essence of the message:

“«El ritmo es la arquitectura del ser, el dinamismo interno que le da forma; es la expresión pura de la fuerza vital. El ritmo es el choque que produce la vibración, es la fuerza que a través de los sentidos nos conmueve en la raíz misma del ser. El ritmo se expresa con los medios más materiales: con líneas, colores, superficies y formas en la arquitectura, en la escultura o en la pintura; con acentos en la poesía y en la música, con movimientos en la danza. Al hacer esto remonta todo lo espiritual. El ritmo ilumina el espíritu en la medida en que se manifiesta sensiblemente... Es el ritmo el que le da a la palabra la plenitud eficaz; es la

palabra de Dios, es decir, la palabra rítmica, la que creó el mundo» (*Liberte I (204)*). [Rhythm is the architecture of being, the inner dynamic that gives it form, the pure expression of the life force. Rhythm is the vibratory shock, the force which, through our sense, grips us at the root of our being. It is expressed through corporeal and sensual means; through lines, surfaces, colours, and volumes in architecture, sculpture or painting; through accents in poetry and music, through movement in the dance. This all adds up to the spiritual. Rhythm illuminates the spirit if it manifests itself sensitively... It is rhythm that makes words completely efficient; it is the word of God, that is, the rhythmic word, which created the world] (“*Black African aesthetics*” [*L’Esthétique negro-africaine*”] *Liberte I (204)*).

Marcelino Arozarena embraced this concept in a very relevant manner. Anytime one is discussing this particular period of Cuban literature, it is time for his name to cease being omitted or relegated to the realm of unimportant expression. This may be a posthumous homage, but a late vindication is preferable to so shameful oblivion.

Notes:

- 1- A poetic composition made up of mostly invented words and expressions that lack de any meaning of their own, but do have a poetic function. Their sound values may take on meaning with relation to the text in its entirety. The term was first coined by Mexican writer and critic Alfonso Reyes (1889-1959).
- 2- An African ritual characterized by drum playing.