

URBANEJA ACHELPOHL

LUIS M. URBANEJA ACHELPOHL is a Venezuelan who has written many short stories and sketches and one novel. The man and his work are highly esteemed by his fellow-countrymen. Outside of Venezuela, however, he seems to be little known. This may be due to the fact that only the novel has appeared in book form.¹ The stories are scattered through publications which have appeared in Venezuela at one time or another during the past thirty years.² Their author has never cared to collect them and says that when he happens upon one of his earlier works he feels a kind of strange familiarity "as when one meets a natural son whom one had forgotten all about."

The man himself is a worthy and interesting representative of Venezuela at its best. He is descended from *conquistadores* on his father's side. He tells with pride of a paternal ancestor who was killed in the plaza of Cumaná fighting a party of English buccaneers—a party led by "el Draque" according to the family tradition. On the other hand, the Achelpohls were fairly recent comers to Venezuela from Germany. As his literary works clearly show, Urbaneja Achelpohl knows his country in all her aspects—capital and province, *selva* and *llano*. And, like the good Venezuelan that he is, he has had first-hand experience with revolutions.

*Tierra del sol*³ was the first of Urbaneja Achelpohl's stories to appear in *El Cojo Ilustrado*. In it the author tells of the unfortunate love affair of a bright, happy, industrious young country girl. Of all the village girls

¹ "En este país! . . ." Buenos Aires, 1916 (?). A second edition appeared in Caracas in 1920.

² Over forty of the stories came out in *El Cojo Ilustrado* of Caracas between the years 1896 and 1915 when the magazine ceased publication.

³ *El Cojo Ilustrado*, V (1896), pp. 582-586. The complete title was "Tierra del sol, I. Botón de algodónero"; apparently the first of a proposed series which was not continued.

who gather the shrub *chamiza* for fuel, Paulina alone has never been known to slip off into the thicket to keep an appointment with a lover. But unmistakable evidence is found that she and Eusebio, the arriero, have been meeting in the coffee grove. Now Antonio the "straw-boss" of the *socaladores*,⁴ sees no reason why he should not be the favored one instead of Eusebio. That night at the *llora*, or dance, he wants to dance with Paulina but Eusebio will not permit it. When, after a few more drinks, Antonio again tries to dance with her, there is a fight. Eusebio is stabbed mortally and Antonio escapes to the mountain. During the days that follow, Paulina grows weaker and weaker and finally dies.

The 'mood' of the story is created by means of sentences and phrases descriptive of the coffee plantation, the dance, and the cane brake and also by reproducing the gossip of the old women and a part of the lovers' conversation with its inevitable "you don't love me as much as I love you." But this is not all. Urbaneja Achelpohl frequently interrupts himself to invoke or apostrophise the birds and flowers of the *selva*, or the village maidens, or the musical instruments of the rustic dance orchestra. The use of such devices was almost habitual with him in his earlier work and even led one of his admiring friends to remark:

Pero Urbaneja Achelpohl tiene el defecto de ahogar a sus personajes bajo la vana y prolija hojarasca de la descripción del paisaje en donde pone a vivir los héroes de sus cuentos.⁵

It must be remembered, however, that Urbaneja Achelpohl is writing for a Venezuelan public which never wavers in its devotion to two great gods: Simón Bolívar and the tropical beauty of Venezuela. A foreigner or an entirely city-bred Venezuelan may want to skip these descriptions and invocations, but to a great many of his readers they must bring back memories of happy days spent in the country.

⁴ Men who clear the coffee groves of underbrush and weeds.

⁵ Alejandro Fernández García after praising the story, "Flor de las selvas," in *El Cojo Ilustrado*, X (1901), p. 782.

Of more romantic tone is *Flor de las selvas*,⁶ a tragic story of the loves of Juana-Vicenta and Sandalio. The latter had been persecuted by the authorities so he fled to the mountain. Some time later Juana-Vicenta stole away in the night and followed him for she feared her family's anger when her affair with him should become known. Dressed in her brother's clothing, she burst into Sandalio's cabin but he wounded her mortally before he recognized her. In this story, too, there are frequent metaphors drawn from nature. For example, Urbaneja Achelpohl is telling of an earlier meeting of the lovers:

Allí Sandalio trataba de consolar a Juana-Vicenta; y ella intranquila y llorosa no deseaba sino estar con los suyos. Pero, ¿la tierra no se estremece al primer chubasco? ¿A las caricias del sol, no cuaja el grano que dormita el sueño de la vida en los senos misteriosos de la coa^{6a}? ¿No abre a sus besos el bruñido estuche de oro muerto donde guarda corales, cundeamor, y no se encienden los rosales y las mejillas morenas a sus soplos de fuego? Pues bien, a las caricias de Sandalio, se iba abriendo la flor del alma en Juana-Vicenta, y al anterior desasosiego sucedíase dulcísimo abandono.

The Spanish critic, Güell y Mercader, thinks very highly of this story. He says in part:

Lo diputo como lo más notable que en su clase se ha escrito en Venezuela y que yo conozco, y creo que el señor Urbaneja puede hombrarse, como suele decirse, con Pereda y con la Pardo Bazán. Nada falta en ese feliz ensayo: colorido local, giros, locuciones tomadas directamente del lenguaje del pueblo, tipos descritos con una sobriedad y exactitud admirables, trama consistente, lozana fantasía combinada con la verdad sujeta siempre a la realidad palpitante, y doctrina saludable y vigorosa en las manifestaciones éticas. No abusa de lo gráfico ni habla de lo feo, ni siquiera para embellecerlo.⁷

These two stories exemplify a type which was a favorite with Urbaneja Achelpohl—a tale of romantic love in a

⁶ "Composición en prosa galardonada con pluma de oro" in the 'Certamen literario' of *El Cojo Ilustrado* and published in that magazine, VII (1898), pp. 15-17.

^{6a} In its primary sense *coa* means a hoe or spade; but the word is also used in the sense of "harvest" or, as in this case, "field." See Lisandro Alvarado, *Glosario de voces indígenas de Venezuela*, Caracas, 1921.

⁷ J. Güell y Mercader, in *El Cojo Ilustrado*, VII (1898), p. 288.

rural setting essentially Venezuelan. Among other stories of this kind is that which tells how Cristela and Hilarión were kept apart by a feud of long standing between their families and how at last they pined away and died on the very same day.⁸ In another, jealousy causes Andrecillo to kill her whom he loves.⁹ *Flor de los campos*¹⁰ is the story of a village girl who ran away to the city to become the mistress of a student of medicine. Another kind of love, the tender affection of an elderly husband and wife for one another, is the theme of *Bien-Venido*¹¹ and of *Por los senderos del amor*.¹²

Less real than Paulina and Juana-Vicenta, quite fairy-like in fact, is the heroine of *Mechita la linda*.¹³ She had spent her childhood guiding a blind father who begged his way about the country. In this way she had acquired an insatiable wanderlust. She was the darling of the region and the whole country-side was horrified one morning to find that she had been assaulted and murdered. Don Diego had really committed the crime but was able to fix the blame upon Juan Collozo, the thief. The people suspected the truth but Don Diego's wealth and social position over-awed the magistrate and Juan was found guilty. In this cynical conclusion and elsewhere in denouncing pillage, conscription and peonage, our author cries out against injustice like the prophet of old.

Men of all classes and conditions appear in Urbaneja Achelpohl's stories. *La parejona*¹⁴ tells of a really beautiful friendship existing between two most unlovely characters—Manueluco, the drunkard, who was of good family and had known better days, and Serio, the thief, who stole only when necessity drove him to it; but that was frequently for either he or his friend was always in need. Referring to this friendship, the author says,

⁸ "Cristela e Hilarión." *Ibid.*, XIII (1904), pp. 534-537.

⁹ "El rodal de las higueras." *Ibid.*, XV (1906), pp. 19-20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XV (1906), p. 694.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, XVI (1907), pp. 11-12.

¹² *Ibid.*, XXIII (1914), pp. 435-437.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XV (1906), pp. 723-724.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, XIV (1905), pp. 634-636.

¿Acaso el lirio acuático nace sólo en el límpido cristal de la corriente y no en el revalse inmundo, donde la muerte recluta sus aliados?

One of the best of the stories is that of the beggar and Ovejón, the lone highwayman. Ovejón binds up the poor fellow's bruised leg, gives him money and a new shirt and, in answer to his words of gratitude, merely says, "Hoy por ti, mañana por mí." A few hours later when Ovejón rides past the tavern on a stolen mare, the beggar recognizes him but says nothing although there is a price on the outlaw's head. When the soldiers who are pursuing Ovejón, loose the mare's colt so that it may lead them to where he is, the beggar intercepts it at a turn in the road and kills it saying, "Hoy por ti, mañana por mí."¹⁵

Urbaneja Achelpohl seems to prefer to write about country life and rural types but he can and does on occasion portray the life and people of Caracas. These characters are usually young men of the middle class or broken old men from the depths of the city's misery. Among the latter is the kind-hearted beggar Anselmo, a fine old fellow who is exploited and abused by his shameless daughter-in-law. But Anselmo endures it all in order to be near the little grand-daughters whom their mother neglects.¹⁶ Equally unfortunate in his home life is 'el señor Lucas,' an industrious consumptive who spent his days and evenings walking over the city in order to sell some second-hand piece of furniture or clothing.¹⁷

Urbaneja Achelpohl is not especially kind to the young men of Caracas in his works. There is the insinuating young grafter who solicits money which he says is to be used to found a newspaper devoted to the up-lift of the masses.¹⁸ Another young fellow, after an idle boyhood and a vicious young manhood, goes to the devil most completely with the assistance of his mistress, a low-class

¹⁵ "Ovejón," in an anthology entitled *Los mejores cuentos venezolanos, prólogo, selección y notas de Valentín de Pedro*, Barcelona, 1923, pp. 177-188.

¹⁶ "Hasta la noche." *El Cojo Ilustrado*, XV (1906), pp. 100-103.

¹⁷ "Aparecido." *Ibid.*, XVI (1907), pp. 64-66.

¹⁸ "El perillán." *Ibid.*, XVI (1907), pp. 492-494.

prostitute.¹⁹ The three 'envenenados' were Raúl, the young type-setter, Evangelista, a copyist employed in one of the minor courts, and Tomás who had to keep books in his father's store. Each day after work they go to the café and there, drunk with idealism, they pour forth streams of oratory in which they build Utopias, decry the conditions under which agriculture is carried on in Venezuela or maintain most vehemently that education for women is the crying need of the hour. However, as evening comes on, Tomás who is the only one of the three in comfortable circumstances, pays for the beers and they all go home to supper and to their every-day selves.²⁰

Tirso is a young lawyer who, disgusted with his colleagues and disillusioned with regard to his profession, runs away from it all; but he is calmed by the vastness of the sea and impressed by the serenity of the steersman who says that he worries about nothing and indeed thinks about nothing while he holds the tiller. And so the young lawyer returns to his office determined to 'carry on.'²¹ This little work shows Urbaneja Achelpohl to be incapable of complete disgust with life. With him, *mal del siglo* is a passing mood and not a settled habit.

Urbaneja Achelpohl is also fond of depicting the man of dominating, domineering personality—such a man as the *conquistadores* would be proud to own as their descendant. In fact, in one story, he seeks to reconstruct the times of the conquest.²² The tribe of Indians known as the Quiriquires were incited to rebellion by the priestess, Apacuana, and treacherously fell upon the Spaniards, Garcí and 'el Infante.' Together the two men fought their way back to a friendly tribe. Then Captain Sancho, aided by his Indian allies, routed the Quiriquires, laid waste their lands, and captured Apacuana and hanged her.

¹⁹ "El maraco." *Ibid.*, XV (1906), pp. 664-666.

²⁰ "Los envenenados." *Ibid.*, XVI (1907), pp. 212-213.

²¹ "Tirso (novelín)." *Ibid.*, XVIII (1909), pp. 408, 439-444, 466-467, 490-492.

²² In "Los abuelos." This story appeared in the slender volume entitled, *Los abuelos—La bruja—Nubes de verano, Prima a los suscriptores de "El Cojo Ilustrado."*—I^o. de enero de 1909, Caracas. "Los abuelos" also appears in the anthology of Valentín de Pedro cited above.

Throughout this story, the epic sweep of Urbaneja Achelpohl's prose would suggest *La Araucana* even if the theme were not similar to that of Ercilla's poem.

In Don Luis we have another man of action. His energy was equalled only by his enormous appetite for food and drink. Once during the Wars of Independence he rode twenty leagues to put down a revolt of his slaves. That Urbaneja Achelpohl is able to describe graphically action as well as scenes and characters, can be seen in the following extract. (Don Luis is approaching the ranch where the uprising has occurred.)

El tambor se oía más claro y en el clamoreo se distinguía el vocear borracho de los hombres y el cantar gangoso de las mujeres. Por entre las malezas le llegó el resplandor de una inmensa hoguera. Llamadas rojas lamían ansiosas grandes piezas de carne en improvisados asadores. Un negro golpeaba el tambor. Y mujeres y hombres cogidos de las manos danzaban alrededor de la hoguera, envueltos en un resplandor violáceo. Don Luis cayó de súbito entre ellos y a favor de la lumbre su sombra descomunal se extendió en el patio. Los negros ante aquella aparición corrieron a la desbandada. Don Luis se encaminó a la casa y bajo su mano la vieja campana de portal, secos y vibrantes dió tres golpes que anunciaban la presencia del amo. A la llamada los negros ya rehechos, entre espantosos alaridos y el tremolar de sus lanzas, cubrieron al patio. En las sombras brillaban los ojos y el marfil de las dentaduras. Un negro de los recién comprados alto y fornudo, capitaneábalos. A su voz formáronse en dos alas y marchando siempre recelosos fuéronse hacia el amo. El capataz como para infundirles valor, se precipitó el primero hacia Don Luis que salía a su encuentro. Un grito ensordecedor salió de todos aquellos pechos en una confusión de cotorras.

—Viva la libertad! Viva el taita Bolívar! Viva el Rey! Viva Chepito!

Por los aires voló la lanza. De un solo golpe en la mitad de la frente el puño de Don Luis tendía al capataz. Y en un grito estentóreo contestaba al reto de la negrería:

—Aquí no manda sino yo!

Y avanzó con el asta de una lanza sobre aquella masa negra que se desbandaba. Un esclavo que perplejo esperó su acometida, rodó quebrado el espinazo. Todos huían, imploraban y arrojaban las armas.

Rendidos. Don Luis se sentó en el tambor, frente a la

hoguera. El cielo profusamente estrellado parecía muy cerca de la tierra. La inmensa masa de los árboles semejava una muralla en la tiniebla. Ante la carne de los asadores Don Luis sintió despertar su voraz apetito: los negros golpeados, se revolcaban a sus pies, en la agonía.²³

Don Mauro²⁴ also lived like a feudal lord on his *hato*. Like Madariaga in Blasco Ibáñez's *Los cuatro jinetes del Apocalipsis*, he ruled his people with an iron hand and numbered many of his own illegitimate offspring among his peons. The story or sketch consists of two different episodes: first, of how Don Mauro stole a woman from her father and brothers and rode off with her amid a hail of bullets; and second, "el lance de la encantada" which is a convincing treatment of the supernatural even though alcohol and Don Mauro's imagination suggest themselves as the real explanation.

A young man of today, but of the same stamp as Don Mauro, Don Luis, is the protagonist of *Al caer del crepúsculo*.²⁵ In the attitude it reflects, this sketch is one of the most healthy and optimistic which have been written in Venezuela. A young man inheriting a farm, a ranch and many debts, sells the farm and moves out into the 'cow-country' determined to retrieve the fortune of his family. But that not everyone can work out his salvation by going back to the land, appears to be the thesis of another of the stories. Matías has bad luck with his crops, is cheated by his uncle and returns to the city and to his old vicious habits.²⁶

At times the author turns his attention to sociological phenomena characteristic of Venezuela. In *Lo que se derrumba*²⁷ we have the defeated family, descendants of *próceres de la independencia*. Its economic decline began with the sudden freeing of the slaves and its moral decay is now evident in the grandson and the grand-daughter;

²³ "El ancestro (novelín)." *El Cojo Ilustrado*, XXII (1913), pp. 669-671.

²⁴ "Don Mauro." *Ibid.*, XXIII (1914), pp. 66-68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, XXII (1914), pp. 322-324.

²⁶ "Un perdido." *Ibid.*, XVI (1907), pp. 122-124.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, XIII (1904), pp. 628-630.

Mauricio has become a 'rounder' and Lina allows the grandson of one of the family's former slaves to make love to her. The tone is pessimistic throughout, a rare occurrence in Urbaneja Achelpohl's work. *De donde vino el mal*²⁸ tells of the break-down in morale of a formerly industrious community of small farmers. An old beggar had said, "Las aguas son de Dios. Son mías, son de mi perra." This anarchistic principle, when applied to the irrigating of the fields, had turned fertile farms into wasteland and thrifty peasants into vagabonds.

In *En la Fundación*²⁹ Urbaneja Achelpohl presents a study of the psychology of the Venezuelan agricultural day-laborer. Of course the driving, domineering 'strong man' referred to above presupposes a class of inferiors who can be driven and domineered over. "La Fundación" is a sugar plantation and among the men who work there cutting sugar cane, is one rebel who cannot conceal his contempt for the other wage-slaves who allow themselves to be beaten by the *patrón* and merely say, while they try to dodge the blows, "Está bueno, compadre, tiene razón." One afternoon he himself is beaten. He does not strike back; he has not yet progressed that far toward the achievement of self-respecting manhood, but that night he sets fire to the buildings in blind protest.

Urbaneja Achelpohl is no professional humorist; nevertheless humorous touches are not infrequent in his work. Sometimes it is a rather bitter sort of humor. The son who was thought to have died gloriously, fighting for Cuban independence, came home one day. He was the proprietor and manipulator of a Punch and Judy show.³⁰ *La campana*³¹ is the story of a crippled soldier, a tramp saddler's apprentice and a run-away school-boy, who spent Christmas eve by the roadside. They were lost and cold and hungry. But during the night they were cheered by hearing bells which they took to mean that they were near some village.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, XIV (1905), pp. 576-577.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, XIV (1905), pp. 611-614.

³⁰ "Cepa de libertadores." *Ibid.*, XX (1911), pp. 346-349.

³¹ *Ibid.*, XIV (1905), pp. 24-25.

Next morning they found that the only bell within miles was hanging from the neck of a goat tethered near by. The so-called 'surprise ending' is not, however, common in Urbaneja Achelpohl's work.

Perhaps the most amusing story is one entitled *Las hazañas de Chango Carpio y Sietecueros*.³² In it the author satirizes the revolutions. Chango Carpio and his partner, Sietecueros, were two discharged soldiers whom hunger drove to chicken-stealing. When poor, unfortunate Sietecueros was caught in the act by the owner of the poultry, Chango, with great presence of mind, declared himself a revolution, confiscated the birds and drafted their owner into his nascent 'army.' Soon "General" Chango Carpio was not only the head of a mythical revolution but also the leader of a small but very real band of robbers which had all the equipment necessary to a revolutionary army, including women camp followers. In time the two heroes were captured and pardoned by the government. But they continued to work out their respective destinies in the same directions in which they had started, for Chango became a village constable and Sietecueros became a huckster and continued to deal in eggs and poultry.

Except when love is his theme, Urbaneja Achelpohl sees the world through the eyes of a realist and especially is this true when he writes of war. Occasionally, to be sure, he recounts some unusual exploit, as, for example, the incident of the elderly civilian who, mounted on his black mule, served as ammunition-runner to a field-piece and later, after a few more drinks of brandy, proved himself a better gun pointer than any of the artillerymen.³³ But in general, a fine, spirited charge seems to interest our author less than what happened before and after. War to him means conscripts torn from their families, long marches through mud and rain, utter weariness and ravenous hunger, foraging and stealing from friend as well as foe, hogs rooting out the newly buried dead, and discharged

³² *Ibid.*, XV (1906), pp. 73-75.

³³ "De cuando era mozo." *Ibid.*, XXIII (1914), pp. 294-296.

cripples begging their way along the roads and through the villages.

Of course even a "ferviente paladín del criollismo"³⁴ may from time to time write stories which have little or nothing intrinsically Venezuelan about them—stories which might have been written anywhere at any time during the past century. When Urbaneja Achelpohl writes in this fashion, he often seeks to analyse the relations existing between a husband and a wife. Pastor Luces married for money and was rewarded by the beautifully tender love of Teresa, his wife—a love which was a constant reminder of his own unworthiness.³⁵ Each of the two principals of *Simiente de primavera*³⁶ married another; then they confessed their love for each other "y comenzó la aventura de aquel amor, lento y dulce estrangulador de nuestras vidas." *El enigma*³⁷ is a clever story of a wife who at the last minute refuses to go away with her lover in order that she may keep her sense of moral superiority to a husband who has been unfaithful to her and whom she has long since ceased to love.

*La humanidad de cera*³⁸ is not at all characteristic of Urbaneja Achelpohl. The designer of dolls' heads is clever at injecting naturalness and individuality into the faces of his dolls. He becomes insane and dreams the perfect, almost human doll. This attempt to describe the workings of an unbalanced mind obsessed by an idea and fascinated by a woman suggests the Díaz-Rodríguez of the latter part of *Sangre patricia*.

In his stories Urbaneja Achelpohl has shown himself to be a sober optimist and a moderate realist. These two characteristics are even more noticeable in "*En este país! . . .*," a novel in which he whole-heartedly accepts the new democracy in Venezuela with all its social consequences.

³⁴ Words used by Pedro-Emilio Coll in welcoming Urbaneja Achelpohl to the columns of *El Cojo Ilustrado*, in 1896. (*Ibid.*, V, p. 582.)

³⁵ *Ibid.*, XVI (1907), pp. 393-396.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, XXI (1912), pp. 16-17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, XXIII (1914), pp. 405-406.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, XXIII (1914), pp. 8-9.

He has incorporated into this novel three elements which are of great interest to him. They are, first of all, a romantic love story with the coffee plantation and the near-by capital as the scene of the action; in the second place, it is this love story which, against the background of a revolution, throws into sharp relief the class struggle which is now going on in Venezuela. The third element is born of the author's interest in improving agriculture.

A brief synopsis of the main action of the novel follows. Josefina was of good family and Paulo drove a yoke of her father's oxen. Paulo was seized by a government 'press gang' and compelled to serve in an army recruited to put down a revolution. Josefina slipped away from home to bid him farewell. As the troop-train was pulling out she amused bystanders by calling out to her lover, "Hazte general!" For this was the only way he could rise in the world and be in a position to marry her. And due to a happy combination of reliability, courage, luck, and the good will of his superiors, he became not only a general but Minister of War and Marine as well.

This plot, it will be noted, merely restates a formula which had already brought joy to the hearts of millions even before the cinematograph was invented. Yet trite as it may seem, a love story of this type is admirably adapted to show how the old order passeth in Venezuela. The wealthy land-owner is ceasing to have undisputed sway. The despised merchant class is beginning to lift its head. But that is not all; men whose fathers were peons and whose grandfathers were slaves take advantage of the confusion incident to civil strife and demand social recognition as well as government jobs.

The fact that men of this type have come to be presented sympathetically marks an important change in the Venezuelan novel. Until recently the typical Venezuelan novel has dealt with the decline of the old landed aristocracy. It was almost inevitable that such novels should be pessimistic. But now, instead of telling of the affronts and defeats which decadent descendants of *conquistadores*

and of *próceres de la independencia* receive at the hands of insolent upstarts, a few writers have begun to make these same upstarts the protagonists of their novels.³⁹ These novelists have something of the self-confidence and optimism of their heroes and *mal del siglo* is an ailment from which they do not suffer. This change in attitude from a sickly pessimism to a moderate optimism may be of great importance. In literary terms it may mean that the Venezuelan novel has begun to outgrow its neurotic adolescence. And in the larger social sense, it may mean the acceptance of new values in the land.

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³⁹ For example, *La trepadora* (Caracas, 1925) by Rómulo Gallego and, to a certain extent, *Los ilusos* (Caracas, 1925) by Miguel Toro Ramírez.