

**Augusto Monterroso.** *Complete Works and Other Stories*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. xviii + 152 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-292-75183-5.



**Reviewed by** Mark Schuhl

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This edition combines two of Augusto Monterroso's most celebrated works, *Complete Works and Other Stories*[1] and *Perpetual Movement*[2] for the first time in English, and in so doing should aid in introducing the English-speaking public to an author who enjoys much acclaim in the Hispanic world.[3] Monterroso is a master of short prose, an admirer of Jorge Luis Borges and admired by Italo Calvino. The forty-five short stories featured in this volume are concise, witty condensations of themes such as writing, reading, and literature; social class structures; and jealousy and infidelity.

Monterroso was born in Honduras in 1921 to an Honduran mother and a Guatemalan father, and self-exiled himself to Mexico in 1944. Critics who feel the need to assign writers a single nationality consider him Guatemalan, although his familiarity with foreign languages, his extensive knowledge of foreign literatures, and the universal themes of his stories accurately locate him within world literature. "The Brain Drain" (pp. 96-99) is a text that, like much of Borges's prose, straddles the genres of essay and story. It argues

that the flight of intellectuals is in fact a great benefit to a national culture. With subtle humor, he compares brains to bananas ("a raw material like any other" [ p. 97]), and explains that for intellectuals to reach their fullest potential they must be exported and processed. As proof he cites that:

Joyce did more for Irish literature in Switzerland than he did in Dublin; Marx was more useful to German workers in London than he was in his own country; it is likely that if Marti had not lived in the United States and other countries, the Cuban Revolution would not have had so great an ideologue; Andres Bello transformed Spanish grammar in England; Ruben Dario did the same for Spanish poetry in France ... (p. 98).

When he mentions "that exporting the brain of Miguel Angel Asturias has brought notable benefits to Guatemala, including a Nobel Prize" (p. 97), the reader cannot avoid considering the impact that Monterroso himself has had on Guatemalan literature during his exile in Mexico.

Many of Monterroso's stories deal with literature, reading, and the act of writing, which leads the reader to perceive a convergence of the au-

thor and his characters. "Leopoldo (His Labors)" (pp. 43-58) is the story of a young author who is unable to produce due to his incessant obsession with research. He has conceived a story about a dog and a porcupine, but feels that he cannot begin to write it until he has read every word ever written about the two animals. What appears to be an examination of the process of writing becomes satirical when Monterroso provides excerpts from Leopoldo's early work:

There was once a very pretty dog who lived in a house. He was a good breed and therefore was rather small. His owner was a very rich man with a beautiful ring on his little finger who had a country house, but one day he felt like spending a few days in the country to breathe clean air. He was not feeling good being that he worked very hard at his business that was in fabrics and so he could buy good rings and go to the country too, then he thought that he had to take the little dog if he did not take care of him the maid would neglect him and the little dog would suffer he was used to being cared for carefully. When he reached the country with his best friend who was the little dog being that he was a widower the flowers were very pretty it was spring and in that season the flowers are very pretty being that it is their season. (pp. 55-56).

This selection already reveals the progress Leopoldo has made since he first began writing in his diary, which is plagued by spelling errors. One year later, with the study of rhetoric and grammar, Leopoldo improves his style, and in a third draft he opts for synthesis and brevity, revealing Monterroso's own conceptions of prose. Just as the reader begins to think that the study may in fact be a serious account of the writing process, it takes a final turn in which Leopoldo abandons his work to begin a study of the pig.

Leopoldo's obsession with research on a particular topic is evident in Monterroso's own elegy to the fly that he provides in *Perpetual Motion*, which begins with a story named "Flies" (pp.

81-83) The story itself starts with "There are three themes: love, death, and flies" (p. 81), but he concentrates only on the insects. Each of the subsequent stories in the volume is preceded by a quotation from a well-known author regarding flies, although they seemingly bear little relevance to the stories to which they serve as epigraphs.

The fact that Leopoldo is hailed as an author (in spite of not writing anything) ties into "How I Got Rid of 500 Books," which maintains that an individual's intellectual capacity is measured by one's peers by the size of one's library. The public view of social status is another common theme in these stories, and Monterroso pokes fun at literary critics in "Complete Works" (pp. 72-77), wives of celebrities in "First Lady" (pp. 18-28) and "I Don't Want to Deceive You" (pp. 65-70), and corrupt businessmen in "The Concert" (pp. 59-61). His satire is subtle and humorous, usually including a gradual, increasing twist that rings the excess water out of his characters to reveal their superficiality.

"The Eclipse" (pp. 29-30) has become a staple in many intermediate Spanish language readers, and in its brevity it provides a startling account of the Spanish conquest. The protagonist, Brother Bartolome Arrazola,[4] cannot help but evoke Bartolome de las Casas, although Arrazola is condemned to death for his own feelings of superiority. Using his knowledge of an upcoming eclipse, he threatens to darken the sun if they do not release him. The Mayans pay him no heed however, and the story ends with one of them reciting "tonelessly, slowly, one by one, the infinite list of dates when solar and lunar eclipses would take place ... (p. 30) as the Spaniard's blood spills over the sacrificial altar. Contemporary colonialism is represented in "Mister Taylor" (p. 3-9), a story in which a poor Bostonian finds himself in the business of selling shrunken heads in Central America. Like Brother Bartolome, he meets an unfortunate end. As Corral states, "Monterroso's characters almost invariably win" (p. xiii).

Brevity is a technique that Monterosso has employed to a great degree of success, and his one-sentence story "The Dinosaur" (p. 42)[5] has gained the admiration of Italo Calvino, who states "I would like to edit a collection of tales consisting of one sentence only, or even a single line."

But so far I haven't found any to match the one by ... Monterosso" (cit. Corral, p. viii). Monterosso developed his love for brevity by reading Horace, Baltazar Gracian and the classics.[6] Besides brevity, Monterosso employs a variety of innovative narrative techniques that contribute to the effectiveness of his prose. "Diogenes Too" (pp. 31-41) features a shifting narrator that combines an abusive father and a fearful son. "Perpetual Motion" (pp. 84-89) and "Cow" (p. 71) evoke their beginnings at their ends, thus implying an infinity of the subject. Narrators are often unusual, and can include second person subjects, whereas time frames may unexpectedly shift, noticeable only through a corresponding shift in perspective. Monterosso's style is carefully crafted and exceptionally precise (even in its ambiguity), which lends success to his unusual narrative techniques.

Edith Grossman's translation of the work is very good, in spite of inherent difficulties due to Monterosso's use of odd language such as incorrect spellings, ambiguous antecedents, and extremely long or extremely short sentences. Will H. Corral's introduction is informative and accurate, providing a good general introduction to Monterosso, his text, and his place in Latin American literature.

The publication of *Complete Works and Other Stories* in English is very beneficial to the English-speaking public, and it can only be surmised that it will lead to the development of a following of English-speaking readers similar to others that discovered him long ago in Latin America and around the world. His works have also been translated into German, Polish, Italian, Portuguese, and Latin.

Notes:

[1]. Originally published as *Obras completas (y otros cuentos)* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1959; Mexico: Era, 1990).

[2]. Originally published as *Movimiento perpetuo* (Mexico: Joaquin Mortiz, 1972; Mexico City: Era, 1991).

[3]. In 1996, he received the prestigious Juan Rulfo Prize.

[4]. In the original, his title is "Fray."

[5]. The full text of the story is "When he awoke, the dinosaur was still there" (In the original, "Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí").

[6]. Ilan Stavans, "On Brevity: A Conversation with Augusto Monterosso." Interview. *The Massachusetts Review* 37:3 (1996): 393-413.

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