

## “Granada” (*Aguafuertes españolas*): the art of fiction

**Abstract:** An exploration of the third chapter of an Arltian text which has received virtually no critical attention. I show how Arlt selects and reorders material from the *aguafuertes* which he wrote in Spain in the run up to the Civil War, and published in *El Mundo* in 1935-6. *Aguafuertes españolas* takes the form of a travelogue, although false and misrepresented identities – and hence fiction – are a prominent theme.

**Keywords:** Arlt, travel writing, 1930s Spain.

**Resumo:** Uma investigação do terceiro capítulo de um texto arltiano que praticamente não tem recebido atenção crítica. Mostro o modo com que Arlt seleciona e reordena material das *aguafuertes*, que ele escreveu na Espanha durante a viagem à Guerra Civil e publicou no *El Mundo* em 1935-6. *Aguafuertes españolas* toma a forma de um *travelogue*, embora identidades falsas e distorcidas – e por isso ficção – são um tema proeminente.

**Palavras-chave:** Arlt, escrita de viagem, Espanha dos anos 30.

In his lifetime Arlt was an extremely successful journalist, publishing close to 1850 pieces in the daily newspaper *El Mundo* from 1928 until his sudden death in 1942. However, posthumously his reputation and his importance in literary history have derived primarily from his full-length narrative. In this paper I shall consider a little-studied text, *Aguafuertes españolas* (published in December 1936), which is based on journalistic writing, but which also has features of long narrative, most obviously of the travelogue, but also, as I shall show, of narrative fiction.

Arlt spent much of 1935-36 in Spain, filing over 200 sketches and articles for *El Mundo*, about diverse Spanish places, themes and issues. Arriving in the Canary Islands in April 1935, Arlt then spent considerable time in Andalusia (April-July; August-September, 1935); and in Madrid and Castile (January-April 1936); he toured through Galicia (September-November 1935), Asturias (November 1935) and the Basque Country (November 1925-January 1936). He also visited Morocco (July-August 1935), Zaragoza (January 1936) and Barcelona

(May 1936). Until relatively recently, Arlt's own compilation, *Aguafuertes españolas*, was the only widely available text relating to Arlt's time in Spain: it covers only Andalusia and Morocco. However, recently, three substantial sequences have become available, in Sylvia Sáitta's editions: these cover Galicia and Asturias (1999), Madrid and Castile (2000) and the Basque Country (2005). Consequently it is now possible to have a better understanding of Arlt's main concerns at what was an extremely important time in Spanish – and European – history: the build-up to the Civil War. Even more important for the purposes of the present paper, is Sáitta's biography of Arlt (2000): the list of Arlt's journalism, with publication dates, casts new light on the structure of *Aguafuertes españolas*.

*Aguafuertes españolas* has a travelogue structure, in three chapters: "Cádiz" (Cádiz and environs; Sevilla), "Marruecos" (Tangiers and Tetuan) and "Granada" (The Alhambra and Sacro Monte). While it has always been quite obvious that the narrative is highly organised, using Sáitta's bibliography we can now see in some detail (even without access to the texts of all the original *aguafuertes*) how Arlt combined and reordered material into a highly controlled narrative. It is ironic that he should do this in what purports to be a collection of travel sketches, while in his novels he goes out of his way to disrupt and fragment his narrative.

Although the principal focus of this paper is on "Granada", it is useful to contextualise that chapter: against Arlt's two stays in Andalusia; the writings he filed from there for *El Mundo*; and their reworking for *Aguafuertes españolas*, in the two chapters, "Cádiz" and "Granada".

Arlt was in Cádiz for about a week during April 1935, and filed seven pieces about that city. His account of this stay is the first section of "Cádiz", which is entitled "Llegada a Cádiz", and is composed of material from the sketch of that name and from at least three others<sup>1</sup>. Here, he goes to great lengths to contrast the reality of life in Cádiz with the false images of Spain that Argentines customarily have, derived from paintings, music and magazine photographs. In the second section, "De Cádiz a Barbate", which is about Arlt's journey to, and stay in, that fishing port, material from six *aguafuertes* is used<sup>2</sup>. In this section Arlt selects and reorders the material carefully (and extensively) for narrative effect. The third section, "Molinos de viento de Vejer" consists of just two *aguafuertes*, "Molinos de viento de Vejer" and "Vejer de la Frontera" (this is the order of publication in *El Mundo*). In *Aguafuertes españolas*, however, the description of Vejer, the capital of an agricultural area, comes first, contrasting with the immediately preceding description of the very different town, Barbate, and is followed by the

more technical, imaginative—indeed, expansive—piece about the windmills themselves. Then, in late April and early May Arlt was in Sevilla, where he wrote nine *aguafuertes*. In the final section of “Cádiz”: “Semana Santa en Sevilla”, he uses material from eight of these<sup>3</sup>.

Before leaving for Morocco in July 1935, Arlt was in Jerez, Granada, Algeciras, Gibraltar, and Sevilla (again), writing a total of forty-five *aguafuertes*, on various themes: none of this itinerary appears in *Aguafuertes españolas*. Then, on his return from North Africa, in late August, Arlt went to Granada. In *El Mundo* he published pieces about the journey inland from Malaga and through the Granadan *vega*. Once in Granada he wrote an *aguafuerte* about Sacro Monte, then three about visits to the house of the composer Manuel de Falla, two about tourism in the Alhambra, two on other aspects of Granada and eight about the Sacro Monte gypsies.

In “Granada” Arlt omits all mention of his journey to the city from the coast, and of his visits to Falla’s house; the remaining material is rearranged—indeed, transformed—into three nuclei. The first is a four-section narrative about Sacro Monte and the Alhambra complex. The second, a narrative about the Sacro Monte gypsies, is arguably the most interesting writing in *Aguafuertes españolas*: each of its three sections bears the title of an *aguafuerte* published in *El Mundo*. However, the gypsy narrative is a fantasy, woven of material which derives, probably, from all eight gypsy *aguafuertes*. Finally, “Granada”—and *Aguafuertes españolas*—concludes (dramatically reordering the original series of *aguafuertes*, which ended with seven pieces about the gypsies) with “Lluvia de mendigos”<sup>4</sup> and the prosaically named “Psicología de la masa española”. *Aguafuertes españolas* thus appears to end in its official guise, of travel sketches.

Essentially, as we shall show, “Granada” is not a record of Arlt’s experiences, so much as a story about stories. The first, four-part narrative begins with “Trogloditas en Granada”<sup>5</sup> (this is the only one of the four sections whose title corresponds to an actual *aguafuerte*; it seems likely that the remaining three sections are compilations of the two *aguafuertes* about the Alhambra and tourism<sup>6</sup>, perhaps with material taken from the pieces written during Arlt’s previous stay in Granada, in July). In “Trogloditas en Granada”, which is about a visit to the cave dwellings, already the setting is like a stage set, as Arlt, humming a melody from Falla’s gypsy ballet *El amor brujo*<sup>7</sup>, strolls along, and describes various characters, seated in doorways, against the background of the peaks of the Sierra Nevada, which appear as if coated in cinnamon dust.

Next, in “La Alhambra y el público”, Arlt focuses on the question of tourism and travel writing, a subject which was first discussed, at some length, in “Llegada a Cádiz”. He says that he finds the Alhambra disappointing, and denounces writers, among them Washington Irving, whose descriptions of the palace he considers idealised and vague, and whose stories he says might have taken place anywhere in the Middle East. However, he then, ostensibly denigrating the palace, gives an accurate description of its features—including the uncontested observation that the stone creatures in the *patio de los leones* do not resemble lions. He ends on a note which ought to alert the reader: the fountains among the cypresses enchant the observer. In other words they induce fantasy—perhaps in Arlt’s (writing) mind, just as much as in Washington Irving’s.

The third section in this first, four-part narrative, “El amor propio en la Alhambra”, is more complex. It begins with a denunciation of standard tourism: the guides’ false rhetoric, the real preoccupations of the bored Spanish tourists. Interestingly, and not for the first time, Arlt singles out Englishwomen as a special category: “Alguna que otra inglesa lunática pinta horrorosas acuarelas, alguna que otra inglesa jovencita se extasía mirando los arabescos” (1991, p. 196). He briefly discusses Western and Arab sensibilities (contrasting the “active” westerner who builds in stone with the “sensual” Arab whose creations are of sculpted plaster). This contrasting mentality explains, in Arlt’s view, the disappointment of tourists, who have been misled by photographs. In a sense we are back where we started, namely at the realisation, repeatedly expressed in “Llegada a Cádiz”, that the real Spain is not that of the tourist brochures. And indeed Arlt finishes the piece by expressing just such sentiments. However, the issue has been raised again—and as readers we are not, or should not be, where we started: Arlt, a photographer and narrator, well aware of the power of sharp focus on detail, enriches the readers’ understanding of their appreciation of what is different, and perhaps “exotic”. In “El amor propio en la Alhambra”, instead of denouncing a single, false, touristic image, Arlt identifies three distinct approaches to, or readings of, the Alhambra. First is that of the unimaginative, passive tourist (or reader), who consumes a standard product. The second response, typified by Washington Irving and the English lady painters is imaginative, but sometimes over-romanticised. The third is the more technical, expert approach. Arlt repeatedly uses the first type of response as the butt of his criticism and as the

starting point for his narratives. And he is profoundly ambivalent about the two more active and thoughtful approaches, both of which he actively deploys.

The final section of this first narrative, “La Alcazaba”, is exemplary travel writing. Arlt recounts his tour of the castle: heightening the immediacy of his narrative through simple contrasting images, such as heat/cold and light/dark, and using few verbs, he captures well the visitor’s sensations – as I, for one, remember them – before assuming a technical-imaginative mode, describing the dungeon, and speculating on the lives and deaths of those imprisoned there in the Middle Ages. This piece of architectural writing, which does not seem to correspond to a published *aguafuerte*, sits mid-way between the technical observations which Arlt made in “Molinos de viento de Vejer” (in “Cádiz”) and his 1936 description of the Escorial (see Arlt, 2000), which develops into a slightly gruesome evocation of Philip II’s life and death. The tour of the Alhambra complex continues, with a text which can only be the *aguafuerte* “El bosque de la Alhambra. Ensueños y sugerencias”. Arlt deftly captures the reality of a stroll in that shady, watered, hilly place, before gradually moving into imaginative mode: he sees how the atmosphere has captured the musical imaginations of Ravel, Debussy and Falla. But there is more, as the woods literally enchant the strolling Arlt: “Violenta sensación de encantamiento. Si los árboles echaran a caminar, nos parecería natural. Si por la pendiente descendiera un largo cortejo de jovencitas, precedidas de un dragón el episodio sería verídico” (1991, p. 200).

Quite so: in this enchanted place, anything can happen – and it is in this spirit that the three-section narrative about the gypsies should be understood. The rather extravagant title of the first section expresses this: “Gitanas del Sacro Monte – Pura escenografía para encandilar a los turistas – Lo falso y lo verdadero”. Arlt progresses along the Darro and up into Sacro Monte, where he identifies for the reader the masquerade which awaits tourists, and their money. The overt message is that our guide, Arlt, shows us what is false; the implicit message is that we should trust him, and believe what he writes. But, should we? He draws the entire landscape – not just the gypsies who are theatrically arranged in it – as if it were a stage set: “Monte blanco y espinos verdes. Un hilo de agua entre los breñados. En la cima del monte, entre las manchas verdes, una moza con el cántaro al hombro. De pronto: Entrada de cavernas. Sol en el roquedal blanquísimo. En un disco de sombra una rueda de gitanas, vestidas a la usanza teatral” (1991, p. 202). Quevedo-like, he intersperses descriptions of colourful dresses

with allusions to smallpox scars and pus: these are simultaneously real gypsies, and false, stage characters. Similarly, the broad-brimmed hatted, guitar strumming menfolk are stereotypes, who remind Arlt of “cromos antiguos de nuestros compadritos” (1991, pp. 202-3).

It is at this point that a major reorganisation of the material occurs. In *Aguafuertes españolas* the narrative goes straight on to “Con los gitanos del Sacro Monte”, and then to a lengthy narrative, “Diálogo extraordinario con Lola la Chata”. In *El Mundo*, by contrast, “Gitanas del Sacro Monte” is followed by a sequence of four *aguafuertes*. Three of these have nothing to do with gypsies (but are used elsewhere in “Granada”<sup>8</sup>). The fourth, “De cómo trabé amistad con los gitanos del Sacro Monte. Con la Golondrina y un éxito fotogénico se me abren las puertas”, appears to have been discarded – although there is reference to Arlt’s having taken a photograph of La Golondrina earlier: and this is indeed a juncture at which the gypsies’ doors have been opened to Arlt. In “Con los gitanos del Sacro Monte”, which is constructed of the *aguafuerte* of that name, and another, “Vida de los gitanos del Sacro Monte”, Arlt portrays himself as well ensconced within the gypsy community, on terms of familiarity bordering on intimacy. Seated outside the cave of “la tía de la Golondrina”, with the stereotypical backdrop of the moon behind the Alhambra, the narrator, now named “Roberto”, finds himself “gozando este pedazo de mi vida, que es un sueño” (1991, p. 206). As usual, Arlt’s perspectives are multiple: what really delights him is the sense that here – amid the dust and excrement, surrounded by horse thieves and knife fighters, amid the rivalries and dirty tricks – he finds human nature laid bare. As he puts it, he feels like a cat at the door of a fish shop. From this vantage point he then explains what he sees as the reality of gypsy life. He considers the Sacro Monte inhabitants to be privileged among gypsies, and he explains how the dancing for tourists shapes the social and economic relations and structure of their community. He even remarks on the changed economic conditions since the prosperous first decades of the century.

In the final section, “Diálogo extraordinario con Lola la Chata”, Arlt uses the eponymous *aguafuerte*, two others, “La cueva de la gitana rica” and “Historia de la Chata” and other material. “Roberto”, seated outside La Golondrina’s cave, sees a gypsy, Lola, who is dressed elegantly enough to grace the streets of Paris; and yet this woman had previously begged from him – dressed in rags. The conversation turns to actresses, and Arlt calls his present experience a novel, remarking that in Buenos Aires they will only believe it if they see visual proof, in the form of photographs. As of course we recall, elsewhere in



"Granada" (and in "Cádiz") photographs are blamed by Arlt as the source of a false, touristic view of Spain. Later—and as he did in his 1932 novel, *El amor brujo*—he will develop the argument to include film. For the moment, though, we might raise a question relating to narrative. Arlt describes his present experience as a novel: is it coincidence that the gypsy Lola is described as plain, with a slight squint—just like María la bizca, in the novel *Los lanzallamas*? Especially since it emerges that Lola's mother too, unintelligent and unprotective, gave her young daughter to an older man.

The second scene, next day, at Lola's cave, adds many new elements. The presence of Lola's fiancé, a handsome, young, aristocratic German dentist, prompts the first of several remarks about verisimilitude: Arlt likens the situation to a Ponson du Terrail novel (Arlt's fondness for these adventure stories, visible in his first novel, *El juguete rabioso*, is a cliché in Arltian criticism). Bourgeois values appear next: Lola's well appointed cave runs to servants' quarters – and she is an authentic proprietor, with title deeds. It appears that her clothes come from Madrid's best couturiers, and the scene ends with the elegant Lola and her fiancé posing for a photograph, "como en las películas" (1991, p. 212).

The penultimate scene recounts Lola's life story: she eloped to Madrid, prospered with a series of lovers, and returned to Granada to find her husband locked in the asylum. Again there are parallels with Arltian characters: Hipólita la coja, and Ergueta, from *Los siete locos-Los lanzallamas*.

In the final scene, once more Arlt is with La Golondrina and the other gypsies, as they return home at dusk from their various occupations. Once again the backcloth is an explicitly theatrical, stereotyped vision of the Alhambra by moonlight, "como en un panorama teatral" (1991, p. 214). And theatrical it certainly is: basically the scene is a musical, in which the gypsies sing and dance first Ravel's *Bolero*, then Falla's *El amor brujo*. Finally, in case the message still has not got through that this is fiction, "Roberto" discusses with the gypsies the novel he would write about them: "os pondría en ella con vuestros propios nombres" (1991, p. 215). Arlt rounds off the piece by resuming his guise as social commentator, observing that it is a pity that the authorities do nothing to help the gypsies.

*Aguafuertes españolas* ends with two pieces set in the city. "Lluvia de mendigos" portrays an endless succession of genuine and false beggars and hustlers, descending (probably in Plaza Nueva), like locusts. The contrast between the real blind men and the false surely

owes something to Quevedo, although equally important, perhaps, is the implicit evocation of the Esquila brothers from *Los siete locos*. However, he then alludes directly to genuine, widespread poverty: he recalls a police chief having told him that many Spanish peasants were near starvation, struggling to survive on wild plants. And he notes that even *ABC*, a publication which, he observes, “no tiene absolutamente ni un pelo de liberal” (1991, p. 217), does not deny the rural poverty.

The last section, “Psicología de la masa española”, is something of an enigma. Presumably it is related to the *aguafuerte* of that name, published in September 1935, before Arlt visited central and northern Spain, and yet it seems to represent Spain as a whole, not just Andalusia. Typically, it begins with the invocation of a slightly unreal, or magical atmosphere, as observing the sky at nightfall in a Granadan square, Arlt comments that this is “una hora extraña, más profunda que un decorado teatral” (1991, p. 218). However, the main body of the piece is on the Spanish mentality. The imagery is of balance, symmetry, straightforwardness and old-fashioned wholesomeness. He is not naïvely sentimental, however, and views with equanimity “las equivocaciones ideológicas de estas masas de pequeños burgueses” (1991, p. 218). It is difficult to know how to interpret his view of Spanish women, “que podrían cargar una mochila o un fusil” (1991, p. 219): does this war-like image suggest a degree of political optimism about Spain which he certainly did not entertain about 1930s Argentina?

There are surprisingly few connections in *Aguafuertes españolas*, and particularly in “Granada”, to what we might call socio-political reality, especially considering that it was published after the Civil War had broken out. During his long stay in Spain, Arlt certainly made it his business to learn about what was happening, politically and economically. In June-July 1935, for example, early in his visit, he wrote a three-part report on the agrarian crisis; then, in November 1935 he reported on tensions in Asturias; in January-February 1936 he filed six pieces on political developments, and in April three more followed. Finally, on his return to Argentina, after the outbreak of civil war, he wrote a three-part analysis of the general political situation, and a further article on the violence in Asturias.

How then do we explain *Aguafuertes españolas*, and especially “Granada”? Did Arlt believe that there was nothing he could say directly to add to general understanding of the bloody conflict? Or was his choice and treatment of Granada, a city of beauty – and recent horror – his way of indirectly evoking what he found inexpressible?



Granada, after all, had been in political turmoil throughout the first half of 1936; then, the nationalist uprising in July had led to the killing of Lorca, an event which caused international outrage. Lorca had spent six months in Buenos Aires in 1933-4, *Bodas de sangre* had been a huge hit there, he was the constant subject of newspaper and magazine reporting there, and he had also made broadcasts to Argentina, the last in October 1935. Lorca was a household name in Buenos Aires, was strongly linked to Andalusia, particularly to Granada—and he was a friend of Falla, whose house Arlt visited. Are the Lorca-esque backdrops to Arlt's gypsy characters' performances of Falla's music indirect references to the absent, dead poet?

In conclusion, there is no doubt that as a journalist, Arlt diligently performed his informative role of reporting on social conditions and political developments in Spain, as well as entertaining and stimulating the readership with more touristic writing. It is difficult to know how Arlt's compatriots read *Aguafuertes españolas*—although they might perhaps have expected something on the pattern of *Aguafuertes porteñas* (1933)—I know of no contemporary response. What is incontrovertible is that *Aguafuertes españolas* is highly selective and organised, and that the theme of appearances and reality is constantly present, in many different guises. Although we know that Arlt completed no more novels after *El amor brujo* in 1932, there is abundant evidence that he continued to think as a novelist, and had plans for further full-length narrative. In this context, *Aguafuertes españolas* is certainly not just a collection of sketches, as the title suggests: if it has an identifiable form, it is that of travelogue. However, as is particularly clear in "Granada", what Arlt is actually doing is looking for new ways of weaving together different images and discourses: he is very strongly present as a narrator (usually as Roberto), overtly dreaming, imagining, playing with ways of representation—yet never quite losing touch with the surrounding social reality: this is experimental narrative.

## Notes

1. "Llegada a Cádiz"; "La gloria del sol"; "La alegría de vivir"; "La catedral de Cádiz".
2. "De Cádiz a Barbate"; "En busca de un patrón de barco"; "Pesca a la sardina"; "Mar afuera en una trainera"; "Vida de los pescadores de Barbate"; "Vida social en Barbate".
3. "Semana Santa en Sevilla (Primera parte)"; "El esplendor de Arabia: la opulencia de Asia; tal la Semana Santa en Sevilla"; "Qué son y cómo se organizan los Pasos en la Semana Santa de Sevilla"; "Pasos y cofradías. Rivalidades. El anecdotario de Semana Santa"; "Pueblo y aristocracia en la Semana Santa de Sevilla"; "El día de la mujer

sevillana: Claveles y mantillas lucen en el Jueves Santo”; “Jueves Santo, a las diez de la noche, en la Catedral. Visiones medioevales”; “Ultimo día. El Jesús del Gran Poder. Saetas y lamentaciones”.

4. The full title of the original is “Lluvia de mendigos. Los hay de todas categoría. La ‘manga’ no es palabra porteña. ¿Hay quienes comen yuyos?”
5. The full title of the original *aguafuerte* is “Trogloditas en Granada. Reminiscencias de *El amor brujo*. Visitas de cortesía a las casas cavernas. Una silla y agua fresca”.
6. “Turismo standard y Pato. Plática diaria con las bordadoras. Galanterías para Marín”; “El bosque de la Alhambra. Ensueños y sugerencias”.
7. Arlt’s fascination with this music is clear: as well as its prominence in “Granada” there is a famous passage in *El amor brujo* in which the “Danza de fuego” is performed. However, it seems to be for Arlt (like many works of “high” art) a symbol of falsity and hypocrisy. See: Jordan (2000); Gnutzmann (2004).
8. “Lluvia de mendigos”; “Psicología de la masa española”; “El bosque de la Alhambra”.

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