



# *Celestino antes del alba* by Reinaldo Arenas: An All-Encompassing Rewriting of Juan Rulfo's Masterpiece *Pedro Páramo*

*Celestino antes del alba* de Reinaldo Arenas: una reescritura abarcadora de la obra maestra de Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*

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**Abstract:** This article explores the rewriting relations between Reinaldo Arenas's *Celestino antes del alba* (1967) and Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) through a two-step analysis. First, a short passage from an essay by Arenas will serve to examine the general analogies between the two novels. Second, the article will focus on three particular scenes from *Pedro Páramo* that were possibly rewritten by Arenas into three parallel scenes in *Celestino antes del alba*. The goal is to unveil the implicit presence of Juan Rulfo's masterpiece in every aspect of Arenas's work, ranging from themes and character construction to language, structure, representation of time and space, and narrative techniques.

**Keywords:** Reinaldo Arenas; Juan Rulfo; Rewriting; *Celestino antes del alba*; *Pedro Páramo*.

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora las relaciones de reescritura entre *Celestino antes del alba* (1967) de Reinaldo Arenas y *Pedro Páramo* (1955) de Juan Rulfo a partir de un análisis de dos fases: primero, un fragmento proveniente de un ensayo de Arenas servirá para examinar las analogías generales entre las dos novelas. Segundo, el artículo enfocará tres escenas particulares de *Pedro Páramo* que posiblemente han sido reescritas por Arenas, convirtiéndose en tres escenas paralelas de *Celestino antes del alba*. El objetivo es revelar la presencia implícita de la obra maestra de Juan Rulfo en todos los aspectos de la obra de Arenas, incluyendo los

temas, la construcción de personajes, el lenguaje, la estructura, la representación del tiempo y el espacio y los procedimientos narrativos.

**Palabras clave:** Reinaldo Arenas; Juan Rulfo; Reescritura; *Celestino antes del alba*; *Pedro Páramo*.

## INTRODUCTION

On July 7, 1968, about a year after the appearance (and disappearance<sup>1</sup>) of *Celestino antes del alba*, Reinaldo Arenas published an essay in the Cuban newspaper *El Mundo* on the renowned Mexican author Juan Rulfo. In this critical essay, titled “El páramo en llamas” (“The Wasteland in Flames”), a wordplay on the two masterpieces by Rulfo, *El Llano en llamas* and *Pedro Páramo*, the young Cuban writer described *Pedro Páramo* in a way that brings it remarkably close to his own novel:

Pedro Páramo es México. Es el paisaje sobrecogedor y desolado; es el habla popular magnificada hasta adquirir la resonancia de un poema. Es el temor a la muerte y su interpretación. Es la muerte misma. Pero es, sobre todo, el tanteo profundo en el subconsciente y en los sueños, la exaltación del hombre y de la tierra hasta hacerles adquirir dimensiones legendarias. Por eso la novela se escapa. Se convierte en innumerables novelas, en murmullos, en expresivos silencios. No tiene capítulos, ni fin, ni principio como la misma “vida de los muertos”. Porque los personajes están muertos y están vivos, pasan de uno a otro plano, de la realidad aparente a lo desconocido. Gracias a la astucia del autor, no hay tiempo, y el espacio es un escenario espectral poblado por el susurro de las ánimas (Arenas 1969, 62).<sup>2</sup>

This study aims to explore the rewriting relations between Reinaldo Arenas’s *Celestino antes del alba* (1967) and Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* (1955); that is to say, to explore the process through which Arenas based his work on his reading, interpretation, and transformation of manifold elements from Rulfo’s masterpiece. Rewriting is the synergy between reading and writing. It is the process of creating a new literary text based on the transformation of existing texts. Accordingly, the study of rewriting aims

<sup>1</sup> *Celestino antes del alba* was the first and last book by Reinaldo Arenas to be published in Cuba. The first edition of the novel appeared in 1967 and was bought out within a week, but was then censored and never reprinted again.

<sup>2</sup> “Pedro Páramo is Mexico. It is the startling and desolate landscape; it is the popular speech, glorified to the point of attaining the resonance of a poem. It is the fear of death and its interpretation. It is death itself. But above all, it is a profound contemplation on the subconscious and dreams, the exaltation of man and land to legendary proportions. That is why the novel slips away. It turns into countless novels, into murmurs, into expressive silences. It has no chapters, end, or beginning, just like the ‘life of the dead.’ This is because the characters are both dead and alive, passing from one plane to another, from the apparent reality to the unknown. Thanks to the author’s astuteness, time does not exist, and space is a ghostly setting inhabited by the whispers of suffering souls” (my translation). One year after its appearance in *El Mundo*, “El páramo en llamas” was republished in an anthology of essays on Juan Rulfo (Arenas 1969). The present study cites from this reissue, considered by Rodríguez Monegal (1975) as one of the most innovative texts in the anthology.

to reconstruct this process and reflect on its meanings and implications. The theory of rewriting is related to other theories, such as the theory of intertextuality, the reception theory, and the theory of rereading. Although delineating the similarities and differences between said theories is beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting that research on rewriting in Hispanism has been mainly directed toward the work of specific authors, such as Miguel de Cervantes, Jorge Luis Borges, and Reinaldo Arenas. For instance, Gerli (1995) and Rey Hazas (1999) focused on the different aspects of rewriting in the work of Cervantes, Fine (2013, 2014) examined rewriting in both Cervantes and Borges, and Borinsky (1975), in one of the pioneering studies in the field, considered the work of all three authors. The literature on rewriting in the work of Arenas is relatively extensive. In addition to Borinsky, it is worth mentioning the influential article by Ette (1992), and other studies, such as those of Willis (2005) and Crespo (2012). Much less, however, has been written on rewriting in the work of Juan Rulfo or on the rewriting relations between him and Arenas.<sup>3</sup> The present article aims to fill this gap by examining *Celestino antes del alba* as an all-encompassing rewriting of *Pedro Páramo*.<sup>4</sup>

Michael Gerli defines rewriting as “a palimpsest-like process of appropriation, inscription, erasure, and transformation that forges endless series of texts from other texts, thus linking closely the practices of reading, writing, and rewriting” (1995, 3). However, while rewriting usually involves the appropriation and transformation of a limited number of elements from specific passages, the rewriting relations between *Celestino antes del alba* and *Pedro Páramo* are all-encompassing in that they feature a diverse array of textual elements and narrative strategies that are present in every page of the novels.

I argue that in the short passage from his essay, quoted above, Arenas described not only the essence of *Pedro Páramo* but the defining features of his own work as well. Therefore, it can be used as a road map for a deeper understanding of the affinities between the two novels. That said, I propose a two-step analysis of *Celestino antes del alba* and *Pedro Páramo*. First, I will examine the general analogies between the novels as reflected in each line of the passage. Then, I will focus on three particular scenes from *Pedro Páramo* that were possibly rewritten by Arenas into three parallel scenes in *Celestino antes del alba*. In this sense, the methodology that will be employed in the current analysis combines a “top-down” approach (meaning, moving from the general to the specific in analyzing the relations of rewriting), a close examination of

<sup>3</sup> Among the scarce studies conducted on the topic, an article by Carballo (2014) points out an affinity between Rulfo’s and Arenas’s works, yet it neither elaborates on the topic nor provides any textual evidence.

<sup>4</sup> For further reading on the theory of rewriting, see Borinsky (1975), Rey Hazas (1999), Cayuela (2000), Manzoni (2003), Spillane Murov (2005), Crespo (2012), Fine (2013; 2014), and Adur Nobile (2016). For a general overview on the theory of intertextuality, see Allen (2000). For specific studies, see Kristeva (1980), Bajtín (1982), and Genette (1989). For further reading on the reception theory, see Iser (1978). For further reading on the theory of rereading, see Călinescu (1993).

particular passages (namely, the dialogues between the mothers and children of both works, the encounters with hanged ghosts, and the death of characters by crumbling into dirt), and the use of paratextual materials, such as essays and interviews (particularly, the cited essay and an interview with Arenas at Tulane University). I chose to focus specifically on said passages since they stand as emblematic of the rewriting process.

## GENERAL ANALOGIES

In this section, I will analyze the following analogies between *Celestino antes del alba* and *Pedro Páramo*: (1) the role of the ecosystem, (2) the relations between humans and nature, (3) the hybridity between common tongue and poetic language, (4) the elimination of the dichotomy between life and death, (5) the representation of time and space, (6) the fantastic tension in both works, and (7) their unique structure.

(1) “It is the startling and desolate landscape:” Both *Celestino antes del alba* and *Pedro Páramo* take place in the rural areas of their respective countries, Cuba and Mexico. In these remote, uninhabited regions, the elements exert complete dominance over a cowering population. Arenas’s novel unfolds in the Cuban countryside, with its fierce storms, thick jungles, and variety of unique flora and fauna; Rulfo’s book is set in the infernal heat of the Mexican desert. In both cases, the ecosystem plays a crucial role in the construction of the represented world and the development of the plot, bestowing upon them a particular atmosphere of dread and desolation, as mentioned by Arenas in his essay. One of the many expressions of this phenomenon in *Celestino antes del alba* is the repeated destruction of the family house and the death of its dwellers as a result of the forces of nature: First, the house is demolished by pieces of clouds that fall from the sky; later, it is consumed by fire. Other calamities suffered by the characters include the flooding of the river and drought. In *Pedro Páramo*, the novel’s protagonist Juan Preciado embarks on a journey to Comala, a town that “está sobre las brasas de la tierra, en la mera boca del infierno” (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 182).<sup>5</sup> The extreme heat accompanying him throughout his travels will eventually take his life.

(2) “The exaltation of man and land to legendary proportions:” In stark contrast to the destruction and the perils that life in the countryside entails, we often find in both novels moments in which men and women blend entirely with the natural surroundings, marveled by their splendor. The manifestations of this union are passages that contain some of the lyrical highlights of the two works. In *Pedro Páramo*, it is worth mentioning the “astral poetry” that appears throughout the novel: “Había estrellas fugaces. Caían como si el cielo estuviera lloviznando lumbré” (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 206); “Un cielo negro, lleno de estrellas. Y junto a la luna la estrella más grande de

<sup>5</sup> “[...] sits on the coals of the earth, at the very mouth of hell” (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 4).

todas” (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 233).<sup>6</sup> Other meaningful moments in this context are the recurring descriptions of the rain and the lyrical narrations of Dolores, the deceased mother of Juan Preciado. However, it is when the text relates to Susana San Juan, the “mad” wife of Pedro Páramo, that the poetry that forms between humans and nature genuinely crystalizes. In her first internal discourse, Susana recalls the days that preceded the death of her mother: times of grief and sorrow but also of more pleasant sensations—the feel of the playful breeze, the sound of the twittering sparrows, and the smell of ripening limes, which are parallel to the coming of age of young Susana. In her second discourse, she narrates her erotic union with the sea.

A parallel to this vital bond between humans and nature is found in *Celestino antes del alba* in the intimate relations of the child-narrator and his cousin Celestino with the kingdom of plants surrounding them. Throughout the novel, the children see the thicket of wild pineapples (“el mayal”) as the place in which to cry in secret, to play, to experience forbidden pleasures, or to stash bottles of wine. The trees, for their part, shelter them from both rough weather and family violence, provide food, and lend their trunks to Celestino so he can write on them his poems. This bond between the two children and the natural world around them extends beyond the trees to the diverse species of birds, lizards, fish, and insects that inhabit Cuba. These various creatures frequently converse with the child-narrator.

(3) “It is the popular speech, glorified to the point of attaining the resonance of a poem.” Building on the work of Cruz Giráldez (1986), Blancas (2011), and Amaya Enciso (2012), I argue that the two books discussed in the present study produce a successful balance, and perhaps even an absolute hybridity, between the common tongue spoken by the natives of Cuba and Mexico and the poetic language particular to each of the authors. This might be one of the most important lessons that Arenas, reader of Rulfo, learned from *Pedro Páramo*: the inclusion and confusion between the supposedly “high” and “low,” between lyrical description and oral culture, between the sublime and the crude, between the popular and the particular. Earlier, I mentioned the blazing descriptions of the starry sky in *Pedro Páramo*. After the funeral of Miguel Páramo, for example, appearing in the text, alongside some of these descriptions, is a colloquial dialogue between the workers of Pedro Páramo. In my opinion, one of the most interesting moments in this dialogue is produced when the opposites are brought together. This happens when the workers ironically link the astral spectacle with the death of Miguel: “Había estrellas fugaces. Caían como si el cielo estuviera lloviznando lumbre. —Miren nomás—dijo Terencio— el borlote que se traen allá arriba. —Es que le están celebrando su función al Miguelito—terció Jesús” (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 206).<sup>7</sup> Even though

<sup>6</sup> “Shooting stars. They fell as if the sky were raining fire” (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 31); “A black sky, filled with stars. And beside the moon the largest star of all” (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 61).

<sup>7</sup> “Shooting stars. They fell as if the sky were raining fire. ‘Look at that,’ said Terencio. ‘Please look at the show they’re putting on up there.’ ‘Must be celebrating Miguelito’s arrival,’ Jesus put in” (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 31).

the English translation does its best to convey this strange marriage between the poetic descriptions of the sky and the dialect of the workers, in the Spanish original it is much more evident, as the language Terencio speaks is a common Mexican slang.

As to *Celestino antes del alba*, I would like to mention the cultural and linguistic fusion formed by the series of epigraphs included in the work: from literary quotes of iconic authors such as Arthur Rimbaud, William Shakespeare, and Sophocles, to children's rhymes, masterpieces of Spanish and Latin American literature, the New Testament, and mundane quotes by the work's characters themselves. By placing in the same category of the epigraph quotes such as "Verdaderamente la lluvia entre la noche canta" (Arenas 2000 [1967], 233)<sup>8</sup> by the Cuban poet Eliseo Diego, and a few pages beforehand, "Para mí no hay nada como las albóndigas" (Arenas 2000 [1967], 223),<sup>9</sup> said by one of the protagonist's aunts, Arenas, like Rulfo before him, successfully manages to nullify the hierarchies produced by the elitist distinction between "high" and "low." As a result, the colloquial speech attains the resonance of a poem while the literary quotes acquire down-to-earth nuances.<sup>10</sup>

(4) "It is the fear of death and its interpretation. It is death itself [...] This is because the characters are both dead and alive, passing from one plane to another, from the apparent reality to the unknown:" One of the fundamental characteristics *Pedro Páramo* and *Celestino antes del alba* share is the elimination of the dichotomy between life and death.<sup>11</sup> To a certain extent, the two complement each other: While Rulfo has the living Juan Preciado travel to the land of the dead, Arenas constantly brings the dead back to the plane of the living. For instance, during the first destruction of the family house, the grandfather is beheaded by a sharp piece of cloud but comes back to life as if nothing happened. Later, the other family members kill him again and devour his corpse, only for him to return to life once again. Celestino dies and revives repeatedly throughout the novel, being dispatched, most of the time, by the grandfather's axe; and the grandmother falls into the well and dies, only to come back as a ghost. Like the cultural and linguistic fusion referred to earlier, the coexistence of the living and the dead blurs the lines between the two states, nullifying the relevancy of the categories. Consequently, in the two works there are no longer living or dead; instead, each of the characters becomes "dead and alive," as Arenas states.

(5) "Time does not exist, and space is a ghostly setting inhabited by the whispers of suffering souls:" Both *Pedro Páramo* and *Celestino antes del alba* are situated in a timeless present, narrating a story that is largely detached from historical context (Ortega 1976; Fajardo Valenzuela 1989; Escobar 2019). While it is true that in *Pedro Páramo*

<sup>8</sup> "The rain in the night does truly sing" (Arenas 1988 [1967], 203).

<sup>9</sup> "As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing like meatballs!" (Arenas 1988 [1967], 193).

<sup>10</sup> For further reading on the epigraphs in *Celestino antes del alba*, see Soto (1991) and Solotorevsky (1993, 75-85).

<sup>11</sup> "En *Pedro Páramo* la polaridad vida-muerte deja de formar una dicotomía para presentarse en plena con(fusión) de identidades" (Morales-Ladrón 1999, 146). In *Celestino antes del alba*, Ette, among others, identifies "la falta de una oposición entre la vida y la muerte" (1992, 102).



we read about events that seem to reference the Mexican Revolution, such as the advance of the Villistas and the Cristeros War, these references are secondary in length and importance. As to the representation of space, the two novels create a sense that beyond Comala or the nameless Cuban village reality practically ceases to exist. In *Pedro Páramo*, the ghost of Miguel Páramo tells Eduviges Dyada that when he tried to leave Comala for the neighboring town of Contla, he could not find his way as all was mist and smoke.<sup>12</sup> In *Celestino antes del alba*, none of the narrated events take place outside the family house and a limited area surrounding it. In this peculiar setting, in addition to characters who die and come back to life, we find many “stable” spirits and ghosts. In *Pedro Páramo*, all of Comala’s inhabitants encountered by Juan Preciado in his journey are in fact suffering souls (“almas en pena” or “ánimas”), cursed to eternally wander a liminal space between heaven and hell. In this respect, it is possible to mention Abundio, Eduviges Dyada, Damiana Cisneros, and the incestuous couple, among many others. On the other hand, the majority of specters who haunt the ahistorical world of *Celestino antes del alba* are women, such as the ghost of Old Lady Rosa, a woman dressed in white with a deadly smile, and a giant spider with a woman’s head, in addition to swarms of spirits, witches, elves, and dead cousins.

(6) “A profound contemplation on the subconscious and dreams.” *Pedro Páramo* and *Celestino antes del alba* seek to maintain a fantastic tension between apparent reality and a series of supernatural elements that constantly invade and challenge it.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, life in Comala and the Cuban village is but an endless dream that blurs the line between the oneiric and the palpable, causing the protagonists to experience doubts about the nature of their reality. “No sé,” Juan Preciado admits before the incestuous brothers, “veo cosas y gente donde quizá ustedes no vean nada” (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 231).<sup>14</sup> In the same manner, the child-narrator of *Celestino antes del alba* mistrusts the blackbirds’ ability to speak to him.<sup>15</sup> The dilemma stemming from the inability to

<sup>12</sup> “La niebla y las sombras son un símbolo de la pérdida de la existencia. Existir es habitar en una realidad determinada por el tiempo y el espacio” (Bárceñas Deanda 2019, 610).

<sup>13</sup> As explained by Tzvetan Todorov: “In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us [...] The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty” (1975, 25).

<sup>14</sup> “I don’t know. I see things and people where you may not see anything” (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 59).

<sup>15</sup> “—Sí, puedes. Esta noche sí puedes —me dice una bandada de totises, que pasan volando muy alto y todos en filas, uno tras el otro. Pero, ¿cómo es posible que esos totises me hayan hablado! No lo creo. Vuelvo a mirar al cielo y la línea negra de sus alas es recta y perfecta: el viaje de los pájaros ha continuado y ya yo nunca podré saber la verdad” (Arenas [1967] 2000, 33). “‘You can, you can. Tonight you can,’ a band of blackbirds tells me, flying over way up high, all in rows, one after another. But how in the world could those blackbirds have been talking to me! I don’t believe it. I look up at the sky again, and the black line of their wings is as straight and perfect as could be—the birds’ trip has just gone right on and I’ll never find out the truth” (Arenas 1988 [1967], 17).

distinguish between reality and dreams reemerges in *Pedro Páramo* in the form of the “good dream” and the “bad dream” of Dorotea and also in the dream of Susana, one of the most ambiguous moments in the work. In *Celestino antes del alba*, the child and Celestino consider the paradoxical possibility of dreaming about not being asleep.<sup>16</sup>

(7) “That is why the novel slips away. It turns into countless novels, into murmurs, into expressive silences. It has no chapters, end, or beginning, just like the ‘life of the dead.’” One of the binding affinities of the examined works is their unique structure. Both stand out as a literary interweaving of countless fragments typographically separated by blank spaces, without any enumeration of or division into chapters. These fragments take on diverse forms in the texts, from first-person internal monologue to dramatic dialogue, third-person narration, or a mix of the three. In the two works, it is difficult, and sometimes even impossible, to determine the narrator’s identity. For instance, while in the first pages of *Celestino antes del alba* it is relatively easy to establish that the narrator of the fragments is the child-narrator, as the text progresses it becomes clear that some of the fragments are being relayed by those “murmurs,” anonymous voices that speak without giving away their identity. Likewise, in *Pedro Páramo* numerous dialogues take place between anonymous and fleeting voices without the reader ever knowing if they belong to living people or ghosts. In words that refer to Comala but perfectly fit both *Pedro Páramo* and *Celestino antes del alba*, Damiana Cisneros says: “Este pueblo está lleno de ecos. Tal parece que estuvieran encerrados en el hueco de las paredes o debajo de las piedras. Cuando caminas, sientes que te van pisando los pasos. Oyes crujidos. Risas” (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 218).<sup>17</sup>

Damiana’s words shine a light on a central element in the two novels: the echo. In *Pedro Páramo*, after Damiana disappears, revealing that she was yet another ghost, Juan Preciado shouts her name only to hear his own echo. In other instances, the echoes constitute the phantasmal vestiges of those who once lived in Comala.<sup>18</sup> Regarding *Celestino antes del alba*, one of the main generators of echoes in the work is the well, whose waters produce visual reflections as well as auditory reverberations in the form of echoes and voices. In a highly performative fashion, many of these echoes are coupled with corresponding textual representations, that is to say, seemingly endless repetitions of words and phrases that constitute one of the most emblematic aspects of Arenas’s work.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For further reading on the fantastic in *Pedro Páramo* and *Celestino antes del alba*, see Quezada Camberos and Villalpando Medina (2019) and Solotorevsky (1993, 67-70).

<sup>17</sup> “This town is filled with echoes. It’s like they were trapped behind the walls, or beneath the cobblestones. When you walk you feel like someone’s behind you, stepping in your footsteps. You hear rustlings. And people laughing” (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 44). For further reading on the ambiguous mosaic of fragments and voices in *Pedro Páramo*, see Pimentel (1992), Finol (2020), and Del Río Rodríguez (2022).

<sup>18</sup> “Rulfo indaga el pasado a través de una poética del eco, de regreso entrecortado de voz que requiere una reconstrucción activa, como la novela misma” (García-Moreno 2006, 505).

<sup>19</sup> Surprisingly, many of these repetitions, visible in the Spanish original, were taken out of the English translation. The most notorious example of this is the omission of the copious repetitions of the word “hatchets” (compare Arenas 1988 [1967], 66-73, with Arenas 2000 [1967], 86-94).



Returning to the topic of structure, what can be said of the Cuban author's comment on the absence of ending in *Pedro Páramo*? On the one hand, Rulfo's novel contains two endings depicting two contrasting deaths: In the first ending, the drunk Abundio apparently tries to stab Pedro Páramo; in the second, while trying to get up and walk, Pedro Páramo falls to the ground and crumbles like a pile of rocks. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that the novel lacks an ending in the sense of closure, since the last events narrated in the text (*Sjužet*) belong chronologically to the past of the story (*Fabula*), while in the diegetic present Juan Preciado ends up staying *Ad Aeternum* in the land of the dead—in Comala. In my opinion, these two facts frustrate any possibility of a definite ending and open the text to different readings and interpretations, thus transforming the single novel which is *Pedro Páramo* into countless novels, as Arenas states. A similar destabilization of the notion of closure takes place in *Celestino antes del alba*: instead of two endings, the novel features three. As Rozencaig observes, this excess of endings demonstrates that a true closure does not exist (1986, 55). Furthermore, the incredible story of the child-narrator and his cousin Celestino ends cyclically, just as it began: with the scene by the well. It is noteworthy that the protagonists do not seem to have developed over the course of the novels. A comparison between their initial and final state does not reveal any changes or meaningful evolutions.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the child-narrator, Celestino, and Juan Preciado conclude their journeys in a state that is neither life nor death. Perhaps, as insinuated toward the last end of *Celestino antes del alba*, it is because they have become eternal, just like the literature that gave them birth.

## PARTICULAR SCENES

Having presented above the general outlines of the rewriting relations between *Pedro Páramo* and *Celestino antes del alba*, I nevertheless maintain that to fully comprehend the process of rewriting, i.e., the ways in which one text transforms into another text through the conjunction of reading and writing, it is necessary to complement this perspective with a study of particular cases. Accordingly, the rest of this article will focus on an in-depth analysis of one particular section of *Celestino antes del alba*, consisting of four pages out of more than 200 of the novel. As we will see, this short section contains no less than three possible rewritings of specific scenes from *Pedro Páramo*.

The sequence begins with a brief dialogue between the child-narrator and another family member whose identity is unclear, perhaps the mother or the grandmother. Upon telling the protagonist that he is too old to behave like a baby, a supernatural event ensues. As frequently happens in the novel, some words, when pronounced, become a reality, and the child turns into an old man: “Soy un viejo. Me han dicho ‘eres

<sup>20</sup> According to Joseph Ewen (1971), a character may develop in the course of the work or remain static. A development signifies a change in the relations between the character's personality traits.

un viejo', y ya soy un viejo" (Arenas 2000 [1967], 157).<sup>21</sup> Following this occurrence, the elderly child wakes up from a dream only to die at the hand of his grandmother, who slits his throat.

The following day, just before sunrise, the now-dead child runs out to the well and notices that his reflection in the water becomes smaller and smaller until it disappears. Returning to the house, he stands in a puddle of mud and water and screams until his mother comes running out, crying: "¡Quién fue el que te mató ahora! Anda, dime, aunque sea una vez, quién fue el que te mató" (Arenas 2000 [1967], 158).<sup>22</sup> Wanting to upset her, the child responds that it was she, at which point the grandmother comes out with more water to throw into the puddle and affirms that the boy is lying, since she was the one who killed him.<sup>23</sup>

I propose that this scene from *Celestino antes del alba* can be interpreted as a rewriting of the fragment "Drops are falling steadily on the stone trough" in *Pedro Páramo*, in which the mother of Pedro Páramo informs him of his father's demise. First, the water of the stone trough, which overflows and splashes all over the ground, is analogous to the puddle of mud and water in which the dead child-narrator of *Celestino antes del alba* stands. Second, in both instances the time of day is the same—just before dawn: "Y todavía no había amanecido cuando salí corriendo para el pozo" (Arenas 2000 [1967], 157); "Por la puerta se veía el amanecer en el cielo. [...] un cielo plomizo, gris, aún no aclarado por la luminosidad del sol" (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 201).<sup>24</sup> Finally, the fragment culminates when the mother of Pedro Páramo tells him that someone killed his father, to which the child replies: "¿Y a ti quién te mató, madre?" (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 201),<sup>25</sup> insinuating that his own mother might be dead as well. This scene, in which the child Pedro asks his possibly dead mother who it was who killed her, constitutes an inverted parallel of the scene from *Celestino antes del alba*, in which it is the living mother who asks the same question to her dead child.

Remarkably, a second instance of rewriting of a specific moment from *Pedro Páramo* in *Celestino antes del alba* follows in the subsequent scene as well. Once the grandmother clarifies that it was she who killed the child-narrator, the mother seems to calm down and the two, mother and son, go into her room. The mother's room is peculiar:

<sup>21</sup> "I'm old. They told me, 'you're old,' so now I'm an old man" (Arenas 1988 [1967], 131). According to Patraca Ruiz, "El niño/narrador se mueve entre momentos de realidad y casi imperceptiblemente pasa a situaciones imaginarias. Dichas imaginaciones se desarrollan en el momento en que el niño/narrador las dice, las crea en tanto que discurre" (2008, 72).

<sup>22</sup> "Who was it that killed you this time? Tell me, once and for all, who it was that killed you" (Arenas 1988 [1967], 132).

<sup>23</sup> The readers will notice that in the English translation it is not the grandmother but the grandfather who comes out of the house, but this is an obvious error. Compare Arenas 1988 [1967], 132, with Arenas 2000 [1967], 158.

<sup>24</sup> "The sun hadn't come up yet when I ran out to the well and peeked down into it" (Arenas 1988 [1967], 131); "Through the door he could see the dawn. There were no stars. Only a leaden grey sky still untouched by the rays of the sun" (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 25).

<sup>25</sup> "And you, Mother? Who killed you?" (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 25).

it has neither bed nor windows, it is poorly lit by a single candle, and the mother sleeps on the floor with the hens. After that description, the child-narrator confesses:

Algunas veces, por la noche, cuando salgo corriendo rumbo al excusado, he oído dentro del cuarto de mi madre un grito muy alto, y el escarceo de todos los gallos y las gallinas. He oído esos gritos y esos escarceos, y una vez, nada más, me atreví a asomarme, para ver qué pasaba adentro. Me asomé, y miré: mi madre colgaba de lo alto de la cumbrera, y las gallinas, los pollos y los gallos daban saltos y revueltos, tratando de llegar hasta la sogá que sujetaba a mi madre por el pescuezo, pero nada, nadie pudo treparse hasta donde mi madre se balanceaba, toda morada y con los ojos muy abiertos (Arenas 2000 [1967], 158-159).<sup>26</sup>

In my opinion, this scene echoes the fragment “‘You’re lucky, son. Very lucky,’ Eduviges Dyada told me,” that appears only a few pages after the scene of Pedro Páramo and the ghost of his mother. In this fragment, after a dialogue with Eduviges Dyada, Juan Preciado returns to his room, which like the mother’s room in *Celestino antes del alba* lacks a bed and is poorly lit (by a flickering lamp instead of a candle), and falls asleep on the floor. However, as in the parallel scene from *Celestino antes del alba*, a loud and repeated scream wakes him up: “¡Déjenme aunque sea el derecho de pataleo que tienen los ahorcados!” (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 209).<sup>27</sup> This ghostly shriek, as later explained by Damiana Cisneros, is one of those “echoes” of deceased village dwellers. As it turns out, in the same room where Juan Preciado tried to sleep, a man named Toribio Aldrete was hanged to death.

The third rewriting appears in *Celestino antes del alba* shortly after the first two. Following the episode of the mother’s room, half of the family members pack their belongings and abandon the house. Those who are left behind are the child-narrator, Celestino, and Aunt Adolfina. As the child watches his mother and grandparents travel further and further away, he hears Adolfina’s voice and goes back to the house. He discovers her behind the well, singing with her mouth closed while covering her entire face with a paste of white dirt, water, and lemon:

–¡Adolfina! ¡Adolfina!  
Ella no responde. Sin dejar de cantar se cambia ahora de cara con los dedos.  
–¡Adolfina! –grito.  
Ella se mete los dedos en la mezcla y se hace una boca grande, con un lunar al costado.  
–¡Adolfina! ¡Adolfina!

<sup>26</sup> “Sometimes at night when I run out to the privy I’ve heard a loud shriek and then all the roosters and the hens cackling and flapping around. I’ve heard those shrieks and those cackles and flutters and one time, but just one time, I got up the courage to peek in the window, to see what was happening inside. I peeked in the window and I saw my mother hanging from away up on the roof beam and the hens and chickens and roosters jumping and flapping and fluttering, trying to reach the rope tied around my mother’s neck—but it was no use. Nobody could jump up to where my mother was hanging, swaying all purple and open-eyed [...]” (Arenas 1988 [1967], 132).

<sup>27</sup> “‘You owe me something, even if it’s nothing more than a hanged man’s right to a last word.’” (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 34).

Se vuelve a borrar la cara y se hace una boca chiquita y unos ojos y unas cejas que le cogen toda la frente.

Me acerco.

—Adolfina —digo, tocándola.

Sin dejar de cantar con los labios cerrados, ella se pone ahora una nariz recta y larga y unas orejas de ratón.

Como no me hace caso, meto mis manos en su cara. Mis dedos se hunden en la costra de tierra blanca que se va desmoronando sin que detrás quede nada.

—¡Adolfina! ¡Adolfina!

Pero estoy solo sobre un pequeño fanguero blancuzco que ya ni suena (Arenas 2000 [1967], 160).<sup>28</sup>

As we can see, this series of transformations on Adolfina's face is interrupted when the child-narrator sinks his fingers into the white paste that covers it, only to discover as it crumbles that there is nothing underneath. I argue that for her last transformative trick, Adolfina becomes one with the white dirt and dies, thus rewriting the second death of Pedro Páramo at the end of Rulfo's novel: "Se apoyó en los brazos de Damiana Cisneros e hizo intento de caminar. Después de unos cuantos pasos cayó, suplicando por dentro; pero sin decir una sola palabra. Dio un golpe seco contra la tierra y se fue desmoronando como si fuera un montón de piedras" (Rulfo 1996 [1955], 304).<sup>29</sup>

The two scenes depict a similar occurrence: a character dies by magically crumbling into the earth at the end of the work (in *Celestino antes del alba*, Adolfina dies just before the second end of the work; in *Pedro Páramo*, Pedro Páramo dies a second time, thus bringing the text to an end). In fact, examining the Spanish originals, we can see that the verb used by Arenas to describe the death of Adolfina is identical to the one chosen by Rulfo to depict the death of Pedro Páramo: it is the verb "desmoronarse" in the gerund form, which is more closely translated as "crumble" than "collapse." The only difference is that Arenas uses the present tense, and Rulfo the past tense ("se va desmoronando" in *Celestino antes del alba* vs. "se fue desmoronando" in *Pedro Páramo*). Regarding the scene in *Celestino antes del alba*, it is crucial to stress that this is the last time Adolfina appears in the novel. In a work whose characters often die and live again,

<sup>28</sup> "‘Adolfina! Adolfina!’ She doesn't answer me. She doesn't stop singing, but she makes herself a new face with her fingers. ‘Adolfina!’ I scream. She sticks her fingers into the concoction and makes herself a big huge mouth with a beauty spot just beside it. ‘Adolfina! Adolfina!’ She rubs out that face again and makes herself a tiny little itty-bitty mouth, but such big eyes and such big eyebrows that they take up her whole forehead. I go closer. ‘Adolfina,’ I say, touching her. Still singing with her mouth closed, she puts on a long straight nose and some mouse ears. Since she pays me no mind at all, I stick my hands into her face. My fingers sink into the crust of white dirt and it crumbles away and I can see that there's nothing underneath. ‘Adolfina! Adolfina!’ But I'm all by myself in a little whitish loblolly, and now it doesn't even make the least little tiny little sound" (Arenas 1988 [1967], 133-134).

<sup>29</sup> "He supported himself on Damiana Cisneros's arm and tried to walk. After a few steps he fell; inside, he was begging for help, but no words were audible. He fell to the ground with a thud, and lay there, collapsed like a pile of rocks" (Rulfo 2014 [1955], 139).

this definitive death of the child's aunt links her even more firmly to the second and final death of Pedro Páramo.

In each of the previously analyzed pairs of scenes, I identified a significant event from *Pedro Páramo* that undergoes a rewriting in *Celestino antes del alba*, along with other analogous elements. As is clear, all three pairs revolve around the thin line separating the living from the dead, a key feature of both works. In 1983, during a conversation with the faculty and students of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Tulane University, Reinaldo Arenas explained that this literary affinity stems from a cultural similarity and even a personal connection with Rulfo:

P.: En esta novela<sup>30</sup> hay un elemento del mundo de Rulfo sobre el cual me gustaría que hablaras. Se trata de la presencia de los muertos regresando a la tierra y conectándose con los vivos. ¿Atribuyes eso a la imaginación o a la realidad cubana?

R. A.: Yo lo veo como algo de nuestra tradición campesina. Haces bien en mencionar a Rulfo porque Rulfo es también campesino como yo. Nosotros vivimos con los muertos: ellos forman parte de nuestra vida, como la muerte. En el campo cubano las apariciones de muertos eran normales. A veces eran familiares o amigos muertos que regresaban pero también a veces aparecía en el camino una mujer vestida de blanco que nadie sabía quién era. Inclusive la tradición de las brujas que andaban por el techo de las casas era muy típica en Cuba [...] Existían también los médiums tanto en el campo como en las ciudades. Había unos templos donde esas médiums hablaban con los muertos. Todo eso era parte de la realidad, de nuestra vida cotidiana, no era nada literario. Por eso cuando leí a Rulfo me sentí tan identificado con él: para mí nada de aquello era sobrenatural sino algo que yo había visto en mi vida diaria (Barquet 1992, 70).

In the first pair, the primary event was the dialogue between a child and his mother and the troubling question, “¿Quién fue el que te mató ahora!” as well as the secondary elements of the spilled water and the time of day, which in the two scenes was just before dawn. In the second, it was the encounter with the hanged ghost of the mother/Toribio Aldrete, along with the act of sleeping on the floor, the poor lighting, and the repeated screams. Finally, the third pair revolved around the death of a character who crumbles into dirt, and the two also share a verbal similarity and a similar position toward the end of the text. It could also be argued that several of those presumably secondary elements in fact play a decisive role in each of the cases. In the first pair, for instance, placing the uncanny dialogue moments before sunrise has a particular importance, not only because of *Celestino antes del alba*'s title (which translates into *Celestino before Dawn*); in the work, the moment before dawn is when many of the supernatural events take place, such as the encounter between the living and the dead.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> At this point in the conversation, the speaker refers to another novel by Arenas, entitled *El palacio de las blanquísimas mofetas*. However, the author's answer is relevant to *Celestino antes del alba* as well.

<sup>31</sup> For instance, the dead cousins explain to the child-narrator that they disappear as soon as the sun comes out.

Building on the work of Leal (1964) and Nogales-Baena (2015), I concur that the water, too, fulfills a critical function in the contact between the living and the dead in Rulfo's novel, and further propose that Arenas integrated this element in his rewriting of the scene precisely because he understood its latent importance.<sup>32</sup> In any case, all the analogous elements of the examined pairs are equally important as they constitute the infrastructure of rewriting.

It must be noted that together with these affinities between the scenes from *Pedro Páramo* and their recreations in *Celestino antes del alba*, there are also noteworthy differences between them. In the first case, apart from the mentioned inversion of roles between the mother and the child, the enigma surrounding the killer's identity sparks an ironic discussion that does not exist in *Pedro Páramo*. In the second, the substantial additions of the hens who fail to save the hanging mother and the excrement filling the room paint the entire scene in an absurd light that is highly dissimilar to the scene in *Pedro Páramo*. Finally, the miraculous death of *Pedro Páramo*'s main antagonist, Pedro Páramo himself, becomes in *Celestino antes del alba* the destiny of Aunt Adolfinia: a secondary, almost marginal character.

In my opinion, while the shared elements serve as the basis of the rewriting relations, it is precisely the differences and variations that reveal the creative potential of this process. Thus, additions such as the attempt of the dead child to upset his mother or the room filled with excrement demonstrate that Reinaldo Arenas, rewriter of Rulfo's novel, perceived it not simply as a model to imitate but rather as a rich literary source that provided him with endless possibilities of recreation and transformation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Like a crown set with pearls and diamonds, the pages of *Celestino antes del alba* are studded with dozens of epigraphs drawn from the masterpieces of world literature: "The Young King" by Oscar Wilde, *A Season in Hell* by Arthur Rimbaud, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" by Jorge Luis Borges, *Electra* by Sophocles, and many more. Strangely enough, not a single quotation from *Pedro Páramo* can be found among them. However, this detail becomes irrelevant once we realize that Juan Rulfo's masterpiece is implicitly present in every aspect of Arenas's work, ranging from the series of general affinities, identified in the text as a result of the Cuban author's own critical essay, to the recreations of particular scenes and events. Applying Fine's typology of rewriting (2014) to the divide in question, while the majority of *Celestino antes del alba*'s epigraphs are examples of intertextuality of

<sup>32</sup> In his study, Leal points out that water is one of the motifs included in the novel by Rulfo "con el objeto de facilitar el cambio de un mundo a otro" (1964, 291). For his part, Nogales-Baena affirms that the water in *Pedro Páramo* is "un elemento que, desde los textos más remotos del tema del Más Allá, se relaciona con la frontera simbólica entre el mundo de los muertos y el de los vivos" (2015, 393).



the first degree (explicit allusions or literal citations), the presence of *Pedro Páramo* in *Celestino antes del alba* constitutes intertextuality of the second degree: implicit cases of transformation that are harder to detect but often represent the apex of authorial and readerly interpretation.

This article offered a reconstruction of the process in which Reinaldo Arenas read Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, assimilated its most fundamental elements and aspects, and rewrote them all into his first novel, *Celestino antes del alba*: the role of the ecosystem, the relations between humans and nature, the hybridity between common tongue and poetic language, the elimination of the dichotomy between life and death, the representation of time and space, the fantastic tension in both works, and their unique structure. While the essay "El páramo en llamas" implies that this process was conscious and systematic, the conversation at Tulane University hints at its cultural and personal dimensions. Finally, the all-encompassing nature of the rewriting relations between these works, including themes, character construction, language, structure, representation of time and space, and narrative techniques, is surprising, especially when we stop to consider the scant attention devoted to any comparative study of the two. It implies that the proactive synergy between reading and writing, far from being limited to literal repetition, involves the comprehensive adoption of a complex literary worldview. Thus, the present analysis has begun to fill an important gap in the literature on rewriting in general and the relations between Rulfo and Arenas in particular. It is my hope that it will motivate further research on the unique connection between the two authors and their extraordinary texts.

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