



Reinaldo Arenas: The Pentagonia

Francisco Soto

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Reinaldo Arenas is considered one of the most important Cuban writers of recent decades. His most ambitious project was a pentalogy on Cuban history, a magnificent literary legacy that he worked on intermittently from the time he was eighteen. Three of the novels are available in English, and the last two (completed shortly before his suicide in 1990 and published in their original Spanish one year later) will be available in English shortly.

Arenas described these five books as both a writer's autobiography and a metaphor of Cuban history. Francisco Soto's study, the first to examine the quintet in its entirety and in English, considers the five-book sequence in the context of Cuba's state-sanctioned tradition that promotes documentary novels of immediate and practical utility.

Soto argues that Arenas subverted that tradition, insisting that the writer's voice must be a call for freedom, challenging both literary and social establishments. Arenas's criticism of the Cuban Revolution was more than an attack against communism, Soto says; it was an angry cry against injustice and against a system that persecuted him simply for being homosexual. The characters of the pentalogy--"dissidents, 'extravagants,' dreamers, freethinkers, homosexuals"--represent marginal perspectives that Arenas believed should be given a voice in documentary novels but were not.

The appendix contains a conversation (translated into English) between Soto and Arenas that took place in 1987--revised and expanded by Arenas shortly before his death--in which the novelist talks at length about the pentalogy and its genesis.

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