

Edgar Montiel

ALFONSO REYES: THOUGHTFUL CENTAUR

On May 17, 1889, the most famous of their children was born in the family of General Bernardo Reyes in Monterrey, Nuevo León. Mexican history has described Alfonso Reyes as “the greatest of our writers and thinkers”; during his 70 years of life he was a prodigious literary creator, worked in the Mexican diplomatic service, and carried out a tireless search for an identity which would give Latin Americans the status of “universal citizens”. Faithful to his people and loyal during their adversities, Reyes established the Popular University in 1921 for those who could not pay for higher education or who did not have time to attend regular schools. His father was assassinated by those who saw General Bernardo Reyes as a threat to the dictatorship of General Porfirio Díaz, and after this, his son went into exile, spending 10 years in Spain before working for the Mexican Embassy in Paris, Buenos Aires, Río de Janeiro and Montevideo from 1924 to 1938. When he returned to Mexico, he had already produced a vast and monumental written work —his collected works have still not been completely published, although 21 volumes already exist. Reyes was a master of all kinds of literary genre— critique, poetry, drama, chronicle and essay. Paradoxically, he never received honours during his life-time, perhaps because he was a “staunch enemy of pedantry”, and a man of few presumptions. One hundred years after his birth, Mexico commemorates this writer. New generations of Mexican and Latin American writers still have much to learn from him.

Carlos Fuentes once said that as a child he used to sit quite formally on Don Alfonso's lap to listen to him ramble on about many topics, including books and literature. Fuentes was lucky enough to initiate himself in the arduous and joyful task of taming words with such an able leader. But, for purity, all the new generations of Latin American essayists have suffused themselves with the robust humanism of the Mexican writer in order to learn from him the wise prose that attains depth and beauty, density and grace.

Writer and literary critic. This text first appeared in the cultural supplement of the newspaper *La Jornada*.

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It was Alfonso Reyes who defined the essay as “the centaur of genres, where there is a bit of everything and everything fits, the capricious son of a culture that can no longer respond to the round and closed orb of the ancient, but to the open curve, to the

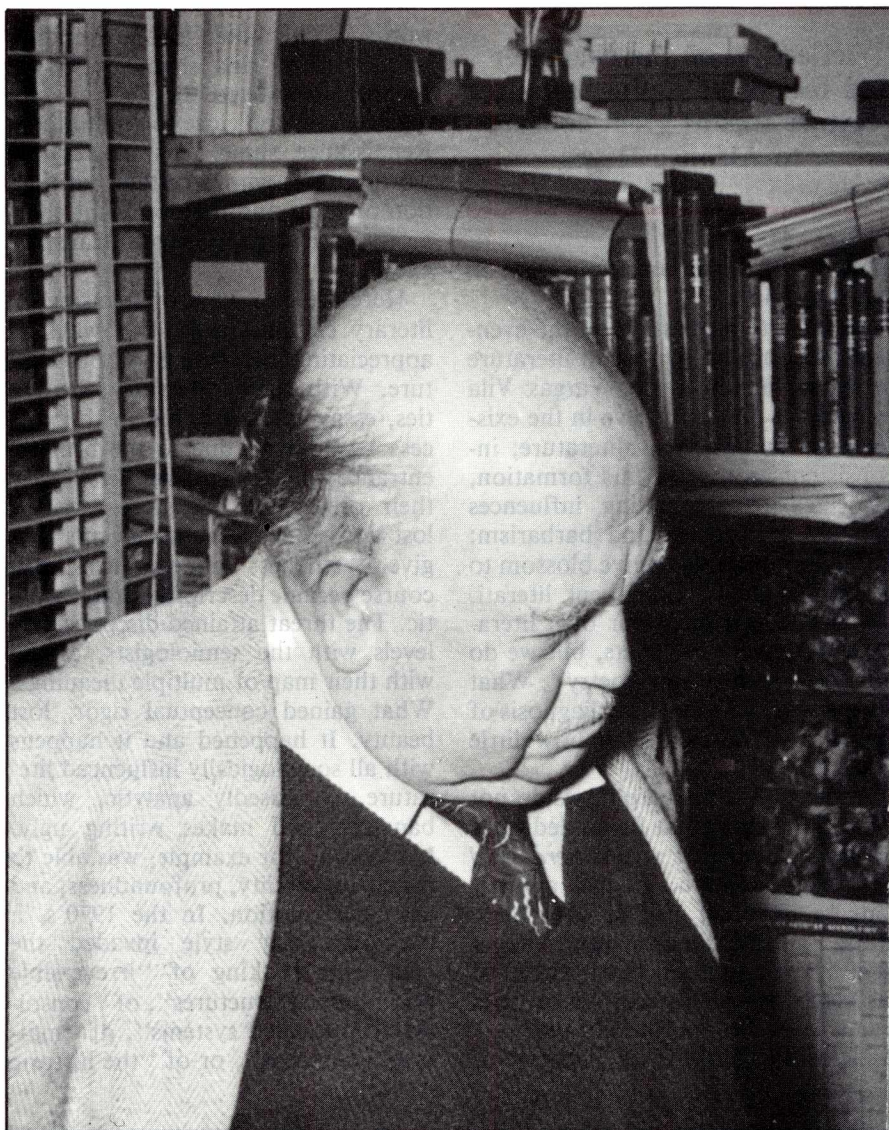
march in progress, to the etcetera...”; he placed it within ancillary literature, in that literature lends its attributes to the essay to deal with themes that are not necessarily of the literary world. The image of the centaur expresses well the hybrid nature of the genre, a movable territory where science and art, the rational and the sensual, and the open curve of concepts and intuitions all harmonize. For Reyes, we need to recover the glory of the thinker, deserved by those who know how to make of the essay a genre of fine literature as well as of happy knowledge, a style which reaches the heights of exceptional perfection. Its writing is done with cadence, musical sense and imagery,

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with rigor in its judgements. His ability to write essay—which is as if to say, poetry—is within the tradition of Michel de Montaigne (*Essais*, 1580), to share knowledge with weapons of beauty (“whoever seeks knowledge must be permitted to find it where it lives”); but it does not totally share the subjective motto of the French philosopher who states, “These are my fantasies, for which I attempt to know not things, but rather myself”.

Neither is there the impersonal, distant and cold treatment which characterizes the type of essays written by the empiricist Francis Bacon. Reyes is the artist-essayist capable of uniting the objective and the subjective, depth and form, harmony and equilibrium as permanent values. This is his Hellenistic descent. With him it is not possible to make the common place separation of content from creation.

His theses, the originality of his ideas, are expounded with precision and caution. There is no grandness in his judgments. Discourse is a part of the idea. A point of view exists only when it has been formulated. The form into which it is poured is not a simple covering but is the transparent crystal in which its essence, the substance of its reason, is shown. To fully transmit ideas and opinions with order, emotion, fluidity, and freedom are not few merits in these times in which economists and administrators mistreat prose with technocratic turns, or philosophers enter into the shadowy kingdom with hermetically sealed phrasing. Pedro Henríquez Ureña said to young Reyes in a 1914 letter: “...you are really free. Your style is not Marcelinesque. You are one of the few persons who writes Spanish with the agility of French or English; you are one of the few who knows how to write essays and fantasies. Why don't you want that freedom? It was good for you to find Caso and me, already with experience and ready to hear your spoken ideas and happy that you should write



He would have wanted that we call him simply, a poet: Ali Chumacero.
Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

them. For that reason you have been able to write what you want, some—I cannot do.”

This freedom of expression is the immense legacy that Reyes has left all dilettantes in essay writing.

It is important to place Reyes in the context of his times. During the 1920's the figure of this thinker dominated among Latin American intellectuals. According to Ignacio Sotelo, Reyes was the writer who “through assimilating contemporary European

currents of thought, rambles about man's place in society, about the possibilities and defects of his world, mixing general considerations with worries born in the daily political struggles.” His prestige slowly declined due to the often pertinent criticism made of his works by the pragmatism of Anglo-American inspiration, which disdained excessive rhetoric. José María Vargas Vila was a perfect target for this critique.

In this respect, it is interesting to observe in Number 6 of the *Revista de América* (July 1914), directed in Paris by the brothers Francisco and Ventura García Calderón (a kind of Peruvian “connection” for those who wanted to know what was to be published on Latin America), the surreptitious counterpoint produced between Vargas Vila, then exalted, and the youth, Alfonso Reyes, who

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made his first appearance in Paris in this magazine.

In reply to a question on the eventual existence of American literature in prose and in verse, Vargas Vila replied: "I do not believe in the existence of an American literature; inconsistent countries in formation, subjected to fluctuating influences between civilization and barbarism: we are not yet able to give blossom to literature; we have eminent literati, but we do not have our own literature; we have great poets, but we do not yet have our own Poetry". What lovely prose! What a true diagnosis of the literary moment and how little vision!

These well-rounded phrases do not exist in the essay that Reyes dedicates to the collection of poems *Serenidad* by Amado Nervo. It has another tone, a different feeling of affirmation, another modulation. Reyes says: "The poet thinks he is victim of his verbal gift. This may be so, to a point. If one of the tones of the book is sincerity, another is mastery of

words... The book is one hundred leagues from rich rhyme, and the author has twisted the neck of eloquence. It is too close to reality to be Renaissance shine. His mastery of words comes with a certain purification of ideas and the dominant characters are brevity and transparency".

Here are two ways of focusing on literary circumstances, two ways of appreciating the future of our culture. With these differing sensitivities, essaying varied, but in the process —above all due to the brusque entrance of "social scientists" with their pretense of Science— writing lost and gained accountments that give it stiffness and sternness; discourse became descriptive and hermetic. The threat attained disconcerting levels with the semiologists, armed with their map of multiple meanings. What gained conceptual rigor, lost beauty. It happened and it happens with all sociologically influenced literature, supposedly analytic, which banalizes and makes writing ugly. Mariátegui, for example, was able to conciliate solidity, profoundness, and aesthetic emotion. In the 1970's, a barbaric essay style invaded the continent speaking of "irreversible programmed structures", of "consolidated nucleated systems", of "majority consensus", or of "the historic

divide which neither affects nor benefits, but rather all to the contrary".

We do not gain much in density and we lose in intelligence and liberty. The novelists with their high-flying imaginations caught the readers' attention. We said before that we should reclaim for Reyes the distinction of thinker. It is pertinent to confer a new hierarchy to this condition, in that it is inscribed in the best continental intellectual traditions; thanks to the Mexican writer, essays maintained a line of continuity, a deepening process of ideas written with care.

A certain European vanity underestimated the function of the thinker, without noticing that he responds to a tradition, a certain type of society and even to a certain level of editorial infrastructure. Thinker is the name of the philosopher of culture in Latin America. He is the leader in opinion that examines problems in society, man and the cultural environment, political contingencies, and the ins and outs of daily life, not in treatises but in

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In his library. Photo by Héctor García/Foto press.

newspapers and magazines. I do not see why a know-it-all like Jean François Revel can be described as a philosopher but not a Reyes or an Octavio Paz, who have made culture the center of their reflections. The editors in Paris have spoken: they want raw material from Latin America, the creative exuberance of novels but not prepared, reasoned, thoughtful material like essays. It is as if to say: you create the fantasy, and we'll invent the theory! And that's the way it was; America created the most vigorous contemporary fiction and Europe created the florescent industry of sociological literature, that served to name the products "magic realism", "marvellous realism", "social metaphysics" etcetera.

Reflection on the character and feeling of Latin American culture was always present in Reyes' work, dispersed in his vast literary production, but certainly two texts stand out as singularly clairvoyant that help us today as we are bottled up in the discussion of the labyrinth of identity. The first is *Notas Sobre la Inteligencia Americana*, and the second *Posición de América*.

Notas are notes read in a talk given in 1936 in Buenos Aires on the relations between European and Latin American cultures, in which Reyes presents a thesis full of significance and prophecy: "There are blood clashes, problems of racial mixing, of adaptation and absorption. Depending on the region, the Indian color, the Iberian, the mestizo gray, or the white of European immigration dominate, and even the vast stain of Africa brought in past centuries to our soil by ancient colonial administrations. The range accepts *all tones*." Now, belying Vargas Vila that we have our own literature recognized as a universal value, a part of the prophecy is fulfilled: "The laborious heart of America little by little mixes a heterogeneous substance, and today, an American spirit already exists. The actor or personage of our argument represents intelligence."

The laborious heart of America has done its work and we have in "American humanity" that which sounds like a Bolivarian sermon, with the protagonist being Intelligence. All the consequences must be taken from this thesis: Latin America is, above all, a cultural reality and sometimes an institutional, economic, and technological reality. This assertion is veri-

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fiable. Upon finishing this declaration in Buenos Aires—heard by Maritain, Zweig, Ludwig, and Romain, among others—Alfonso Reyes asks of the "tribunal of international thinkers listening to me: Give us the right to universal citizenship that we have now conquered. We have come of age. Soon you will always count on us."

No one in the realm of ideas and arts on the continent can ignore this sermon, the long struggle of Intelligence—the creative country—to come of cultural age in America, the genesis of our maturity. This thesis, that the development of culture in Latin America demonstrates a flagrant problem: the defective character of development in Latin America. The high creative voltage expressed in painting, cinema, novels, poetry, the social sciences, in theological and philosophical theories of liberation, and this kind of mighty creative subversion does not carry the same impetus to the fields of economy and politics. Creative liberty has not defeated socioeconomic determinism. It is as if the creators had done their job but the politicians had not. In what social sector do we find the leading role of Intelligence in America? We are a cultural power but we are underdeveloped economically, politically, and technologically. It is true that we do not have many financial reserves but we do have an enormous bank of talent that is scattered all over America. Talent comes from the soil. How can we translate this creative temperament into indicators of

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well-being, progress, stability, and happiness? How can the genius Creator of arts and humanities pass over to economy and technology? It is a great challenge. Perhaps the Peruvian poet Juan Gonzalo Rose, a disciple of Reyes in the College of Mexico, is right when he asks the guardian gods for less beauty and more wisdom:

Machu Picchu, dos veces
me senté en tu ladera
para mirar mi vida.
Para mirar mi vida
y no por contemplarte,
Porque necesitamos
menos belleza, Padre,
y más sabiduría.

Wisdom is the highest aspiration of Man. The political leaders of Latin America need wisdom.

Posición de América is a talk given at the Third Congress of the International Institute of Ibero-American Literature, held in December of 1942, in which Reyes makes penetrating observations about the cultural process of our countries; there is a congenital universality of the American, forged in the colony by different external cultural patterns and synthesized with basic expressions of our own culture: "For synthesis we understand the creation of a patrimonial fund where no one loses, and for which the habits of American intelligence seem well developed (...); in the synthesis we do not see a compendium or a summary, a mere arithmetic sum such as hydrogen and oxygen make water, but rather a qualitatively new organization, gifted, as with all syntheses, with transcendent virtue. Once again, a new point of departure."

Three centuries of colonization have produced an inexorable biological and cultural synthesis. A new harmony has been achieved, a new point of departure: the birth of American Man, the basis of an American Culture, that in these times has shown its universality, its nobility, its place in the world. Literature has been the first free land in America. We have today a distinguished and recognizable culture in the world.

These contributions make Alfonso Reyes a thinker in the grand tradition of Our America, a cultural philosopher; with his substantial essays he makes clear the problems we could not grasp; he gives us the keys to emerge from the labyrinth of identity and culture. □