

ALFONSO REYES AND JOSE VASCONCELOS

José Emilio Pacheco

To Jesús Arellano: In Memoriam

It is five o'clock in the morning. The hour of the wolf. The time, according to López Velarde, to be born, to die and to love. Mexico City is like a cemetery. No one ventures on foot in the streets for fear of being assaulted either by thieves or by the patrol cars. Yet the noise of vehicles does not cease. On the corner of what was the Calzada de Tacubaya and Juana-catlán the ghost of Alfonso Reyes appears. The spirit of José Vasconcelos crosses the Circuito Interior and meets his childhood friend.

Vasconcelos: What are you doing here at this time of the morning, Alfonso?

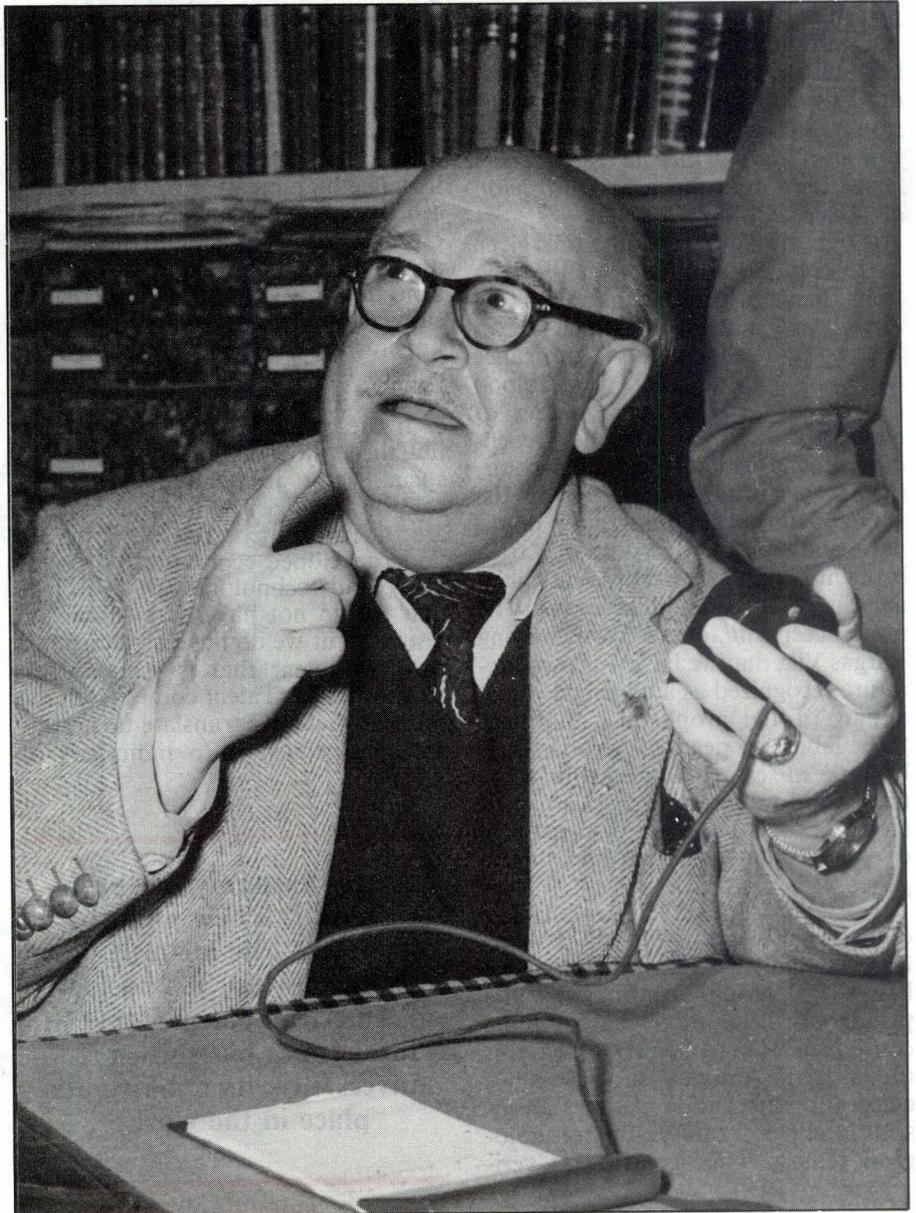
Reyes: I was contemplating my street. A bit sad, don't you think?

Vasconcelos: At least there are a few whores to liven it up a bit. In contrast my street is not even a street. A bridge without water, a viaduct, something made by machines and not for human beings.

Reyes: After death we are still united; our streets come together in Tacubaya. For our generation, Tacubaya was very important.

Vasconcelos: As you shall see, there is no one left in Tacubaya. It never was a rich area like San Angel. It was finished off by the through-streets, all unfinished by innumerable administrations. Hey, what is that going up where the Condesa pumps used to be?

Reyes: It's the Imce, better known as the monument to the devaluation.



The greatest figure to have existed in Mexican literature: Juan Rulfo.

Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

Writer and contributor to the magazine *Proceso*

Don't you want to walk around a little? I would like to go to my house. It has been 20 years or so since I was there.

Reyes and Vasconcelos cross the street between buses that do not stop, but since they can't be seen neither can they be run over. Arm in arm, they walk slowly down the sidewalk of the Circuito Interior.

Vasconcelos: 20 years. We have been dead for 20 years.

Reyes: It seems like 20 centuries. It's another world. I would not like to continue living in it.

Vasconcelos: There are some good things. It pleases me to find that at last they finally adopted my idea on Creoleism.

Reyes: Let's change the subject. I do not criticize the regime nor do I wish to speak of politics.

Vasconcelos: Not even death can cure you of your traumas, Alfonso;

General Reyes died long ago. In life everything is politics.

Reyes: Everything is violence. I could never accept it. I never wished for the suffering or extermination of others.

Vasconcelos: No one thanked you for that. That's why no one reads your work. Your virtues do not belong to this century. Your work is a pleasant conversation, a portable literary salon. You are the ideal companion to sweeten the discomfort and ease the tedium of a trip. Your world is the 18th century, before the French Revolution, of course.

Reyes: And you?

Vasconcelos: I spoke the language of passion, I shook the consciences, as we said back then. Before me, no one could be indifferent. They hate me or they venerate me, Alfonso; they do not limit themselves to mere respect for me. I am something of a literary glory, a statue whose stare few can return. I am many, I am not one. All the contradictions that compose the misery and the glory of humanity are incarnate in me.

Reyes: I admire you and you horrify me, José. Because of you, blood was shed. I did not lead anyone to his death.

Vasconcelos: I tried to redeem this country from infamy, this land from murderers, thieves and pharisees.

Reyes: Your land.

Vasconcelos: Ours, Alfonso. We are what Mexico made of us.

Reyes: You and your ambition and vanity without measure. Why did you not just try to be better than what you were? Your place was not in the republic of power, at least not the power that you sought.

Vasconcelos: They stole the elections from me.

Reyes: And if they had not stolen them from you, what then would have been your destiny? Three months later, the generals, the businessmen, and the North American Ambassador would have kicked you out. Remember Madero, Rómulo Gallegos and Juan Bosch?

Vasconcelos: You did not take any risks, Alfonso. That is why you committed fewer errors.

Reyes: I risked being a writer, to give my country the only and the best thing that I could give it.

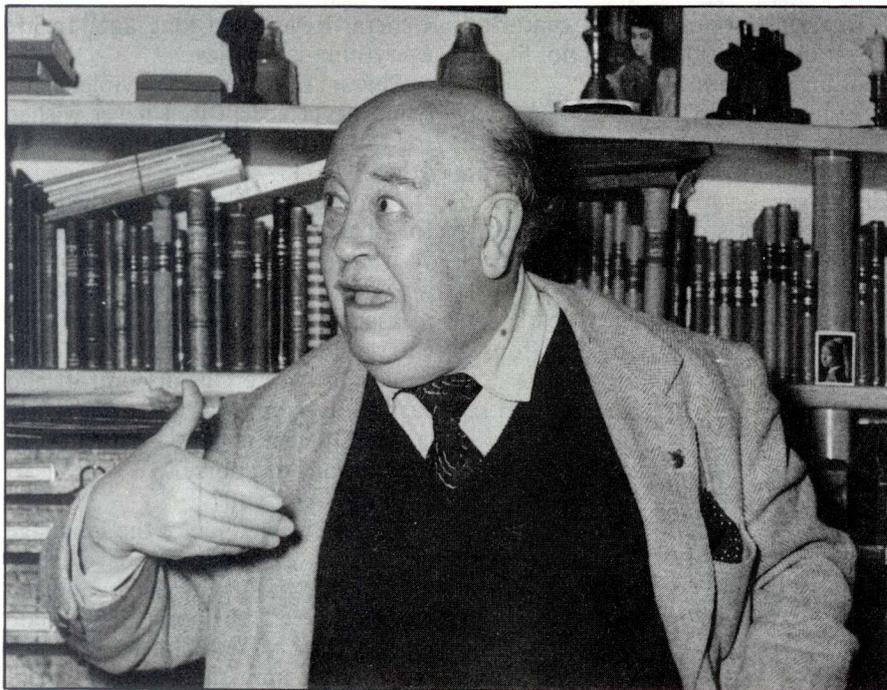
Vasconcelos: Yes, a charming and inconclusive work. Projects, schemes, points of departure, summaries, commentaries. Well written, clear.

HOMAGE TO ALFONSO REYES

Mario Vargas Llosa

Alfonso Reyes, with his oceanic curiosity, destroyed the division artificially created between "Americanism" and "Europeanism", and showed that both sources constitute the obverse and reverse cultural sides of America. He was in love with the West that took over that tradition, running through it with deep but always smiling eyes, from Greece to Spain, and judging it with rigor and with irremediable good taste. But this tradition did not devour him, and he was not a mere follower of it. Even in the most erudite and academic works of Alfonso Reyes, in the face of European thought and literature appears this liberty that the American condition permits him, of a man only partly conditioned by the cultural legacy: liberty to choose, to reject, and to modify. From there the delightful unravelling, that lack of solemnity, that unrepentant freshness, enormously versed and intelligent, that give charm and vitality to his essays. He was an outstanding prose writer, one who cultivated all genres well. He was, as well, so human and cordial that one has the impression, upon re-reading his magnificent works, that if he did not write anything genial, it was so as not to inconvenience his peers, due to modesty.

* Taken from *Textual*, May 1989.



He never received a homage while he was alive. Photo by Héctor García/Foto Press

Fashion. I have always hated fashion, comfort to the sterile and cowardly.

Reyes: You hated it because you could not write prose like Martín Luis or me. Nevertheless, despite that, you were a great writer. *Ulises criollo* is a prodigious book. Along with *El Aguila y la Serpiente* and *La Sombra del Caudillo*, the most similar to a novel in a generation of extraordinary prose writers and narrators that could never write novels or dramas or real poems.

Vasconcelos: I was a philosopher, I attempted to create a philosophical system. But you, Alfonso—with all the admiration that you deserve and with half a century of affection—you were but that horrible and amorphous thing we call “a man of letters” because we could not name it more precisely.

Reyes: I was a writer, an essay writer.

Vasconcelos: A specialist in generalities. Someone who flutters about all topics but does not give himself to any one of them. Your work is journalism, undoubtedly masterly and of a supreme literary quality, but really, only journalism.

Reyes: What is wrong with journalism? I tried to democratize the knowledge of the few and I took those who had learned the alphabet thanks to your work as Minister of Public Education. Besides, Pepe, almost all the Spanish literature of our epoch is journalism: Ortega, Unamuno, Azo-

rín, Díez-Canedo. You also were a great journalist. Too bad that you put that talent to the service of the worst causes. What a shame to see that you ended your days as the star editorialist of Coronel García Valseca.

Vasconcelos: I did not steal. I had to earn my living. I will admit, if you will, that I was tragically wrong about Hitler, Franco and Mussolini. But I did it for anti-imperialism, because I believed that the enemies of our enemies were our friends.

Reyes: Pepe, let's not contribute to the general confusion. Your anti-Yankeeism was as far to the right as Federico Gamboa or Carlos Pereyra.

Immersed in discussion, Reyes and Vasconcelos have arrived at the door of the house of the former. They walk through the walls and enter the library.

Reyes: It's the same as when I left it 20 years ago.

Vasconcelos: A museum. How awful.

Reyes: Pepe, you are about to be 100 years old (you lied about your age, as did don Porfirio). Youthful posturing does not become you. Why don't you sit down?

Vasconcelos: Let me see your books. What antiques. Look, Toynbee. Autographed. No one cites Toynbee. *Sic transit*.

Reyes: But Toynbee was the only one who adequately predicted the terrible seventies. It was our fortune not to have lived then. No one, based

on socioeconomic thought or on magical thought, could have known what was in store, from the oil crisis to the Iran crisis, from Cambodia to the Southern Cone. On December 16, 1969, Arnold said: “During the next decade violence will reach infernal extremes. The situation will be horrifying for the whole planet, especially for the Third World.”

Vasconcelos: You are afraid; Alfonso.

Reyes: I am terrified. I always think of what T.W. Adorno said: “One can never be afraid enough of the world as it is.”

Vasconcelos: You sought peace. Peace in war. That is why you were a “freak.” Excuse the ‘pochismo’; we were the first Mexican generation to speak English fluently. In a world where everyone wants to fight, you tried not to hurt anyone. That's why you stopped the machinery. Everything came falling down on you. Your ideals were not of the 18th century—I was wrong—but of a 12th century monastery: books, manuscripts, tranquility, a good table, and a good bed. An island surrounded by a sea of barbarism. Alfonso, “fire and blood have been our times”. Your virtues—tolerance, concord, respect for humans—are not of this world. Even though you are dead, you are a living anachronism.

Reyes: I object! When all is said and done, it is preferable to your contradictions: intolerance, inhumanity, torture, and the extermination of those who do not think the same way.

Vasconcelos: The world belongs to the strong and to the cruel, Alfonso. Your life's project is utopian.

Reyes: Sixty years ago we translated Wilde out loud. Do you remember? “No map without Utopia is worthwhile.”

The morning light penetrates the Alfonsine Chapel.

Vasconcelos: Good-bye, Alfonso. We'll see you on my 100th anniversary.

Reyes: Until very soon, Pepe. In the meantime, I won't let you die; I'll still read you. Despite everything.

Vasconcelos: I will continue to read you, too, Alfonso.

They disappear. The Alfonsine Chapel is buried in silence. □

* This text first appeared in the magazine *Proceso*. Taken from *Textual*, May 1989.