

A Century-Long Life, A Century of Books

Arnaldo Orfila Reynal

(1897-1998)

Arnaldo Orfila not only lived for a century. He filled it with editorial valor, political courage, human color.

Carlos Fuentes

A teacher to uncounted generations of Mexican and Latin American publisher-editors, Arnaldo Orfila had the affection and admiration of anyone and everyone involved in the world of books. His death January 13, 1998 makes orphans of practically all the publishers, editors, writers and readers in the Spanish language.

Saying that Don Arnaldo Orfila was probably the world's best Spanish-language book editor is no exaggeration. Directly or indirectly, as a superior or as a role model, those of us who have chosen to dedicate part or all of our lives to the noble craft of publishing and editing owe him an enormous debt, not only because of his unending passion for books, but above all because he embodied more than anyone else all the attributes of a good publisher-editor.

Don Arnaldo was a simple man, intuitive and humble, who always clearly understood that a publisher's first commitment is to be a means of communication between the great thinkers and the reader. To be the conduit between the two, as another important contemporary Mexican editor, Sealtiel Alatríste, would say.

This is why at the two publishing houses he managed in Mexico, the Fondo de Cultura Econó-

mica, FCE (1948-1967), and Editorial Siglo XXI (1967-1987), his work was always guided by intellectual honesty, technical rigor and humanist and social concerns. He always thought it indispensable to link publishing with the widest possible dissemination of the important trends of economic, political, social and scientific thought of the moment.

Born in Argentina in 1897, Orfila Reynal moved definitively to Mexico in 1948, when the director of the FCE, well-known Mexican historian Daniel Cosío Villegas, resigned and invited him to take his place as head of the publishing house. Prior to that he had already been the executive director of Eudeba (the University of Buenos Aires Publishing House) in his native Buenos Aires.

By that time, the FCE was already an established publishing house in Latin America. It was known for its original aim of contributing to forging an economic culture, not in the sense of accessible and inexpensive, but in the sense of bringing the most recent and influential expressions of the science of economics to Spanish-speaking readers. Don Arnaldo preserved that tradition, but he also had the vision



Photos by Luis Humberto Castellanos

of broadening out FCE topics to include other areas like literature, history, the other social sciences, making them accessible to the public. Orfila always kept the reader in mind and defended his position arguing that broadening out the public's access to culture had to be both organic and integral, and that, therefore, low-cost massive runs dealing with all areas of human thinking, particularly those most closely related to society, politics and art, had to be made available.

In that sense, he conceived, designed and published series that have since become classics and very popular among the reading public in Spanish-speaking countries. Just to mention one example, the series "Letras Mexicanas" (Mexican Letters) has made all the works, from the very earliest, of Mexico's most important literary figures available to the public. These books, while they may not all be instant classics, have all, as critic and writer Carlos Monsiváis said, put their mark on a generation: *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude), *El llano en llamas* (The Plain in Flames), *Pedro Páramo*, *La región más transparente* (The Most Transparent Region) and *Casi el paraíso* (Almost Paradise), among others. The series "Breviarios de Cultura Económica" (Economic Culture Fund Pocket Books), offered books written in laymen's language about practically all the fields of human knowledge in abridged form and at low cost; "Tierra Firme"¹ was dedicated to making available the best philosophical and literary texts produced by Latin American thinkers and writers.

As an editor, Arnaldo Orfila always had sufficient ability, culture and intuition to identify the best authors and the most profound, innovative, original and transcendental philosophical, economic, social, political and scientific proposals. But he also had a special human sensibility that allowed him to unfailingly recognize true literary talent. That is why he was the first to publish—often against the current and the opinion of advisors, critics and supposed experts—writers of the stature of Carlos Fuentes, a young unknown of 27 who gave him the manuscript of his first novel, *La región más transparente*. Other writers he promoted who with the years have come to be placed on the very top of the list of Mexican letters in this century include Juan José Arreola (*Confabulario* [Confabulary] and

Varia invención [Various Invention]); Luis Spota (*Casi el paraíso* [Almost Paradise]); Edmundo Valadés (*La muerte tiene permiso* [Death on Leave]); Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz (*La estación violenta* [The Violent Season]); Rosario Castellanos (*Balún Canán*); and Fernando Benítez (*El rey viejo* [The Old King] and *El agua envenenada* [Poisoned Water]).

Among the great qualities that made Orfila successful in directing the FCE were his systematic approach, his overall vision, his wide knowledge of Latin America, and, perhaps most importantly from a practical standpoint, his great ability to form and lead a team of the most highly skilled collaborators. This team was made up of writers, poets and editors who had already been successful in Mexican publishing circles. The most outstanding of these are Joaquín Diez Canedo, founder and director of Joaquín Mortiz publishing house; poet Alí Chumacero; short story writer and conversationalist Juan José Arreola; playwright Emilio Carballido; Antonio Alatorre; Manuel Andújar; Eugenio Imaz; and Elsa Cecilia Frost, all outstanding figures in Mexican cultural circles.

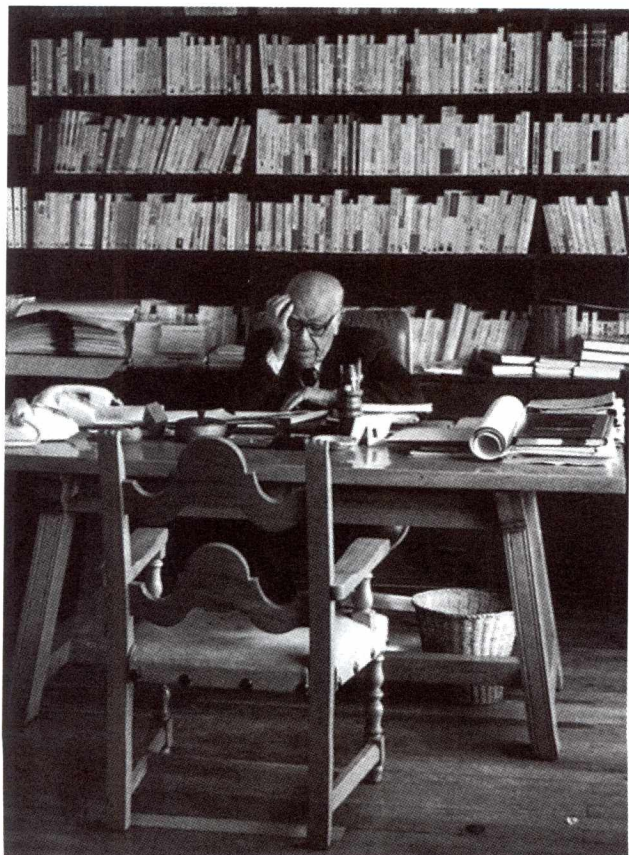
In 1967, Orfila's publication of Oscar Lewis' classic about poverty in Mexico, *The Children of Sanchez*, cost him his post as director of the FCE. President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970)—the same man who ordered the repression of the 1968 student movement that ended with the massacre of students at the Three Cultures Plaza in Tlatelolco and whose administration was noted for intolerance and authoritarianism—thought the book offended Mexican national sensibility, despite its having been translated into several different languages and its author being an internationally renowned sociologist who had worked on questions of urban poverty not only in Mexico City, but also in New York, London, Jakarta, Calcutta, etc.

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¹ "Tierra Firme" literally means "dry land," but in this case refers to the Spaniards' arrival in what they considered the "New World" and therefore to all things Latin American. [Translator's Note.]

Orfila's firing caused a great commotion in Mexican intellectual and cultural circles and led to a movement in solidarity with him. Many of Mexico's most important writers and intellectuals expressed their repudiation of the authoritarian measure. Some, among them Elena Poniatowska, Fernando Benítez, José Emilio Pacheco and Carlos Monsiváis, left the FCE and together with Orfila and the majority of his collaborators, set up a new publishing house, Siglo XXI Editores, with an eye to maintaining and fostering an independent, critical industry in Mexico. Arnaldo Orfila headed up the new venture.

At Siglo XXI, Orfila continued to promote his principles and convictions. He created important series like the Library of Socialist Thought, which included works by the most outstanding socialist authors, and continued to promote the distribution of Latin American literature and universal thought. Siglo XXI was the first to publish and distribute authors like Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, Eliseo Alberto and Cintio Vitier, the most important exponents of Cuban literature. Orfila was also one of the first to discover the new trends in social sciences



and print them in Spanish. Siglo XXI translated and published Jacques Lacan, Claude Levy-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derridá, among others.

Orfila was always very aware of social struggles, which is why he asked the eminent philosopher Don Wenceslao Roces, originally from Spain and exiled in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War, to translate Karl Marx' *Capital*. Orfila's progressive ideas led him to publish translations of the most influential theoreticians and ideologues of Western Marxism and the Latin American left.

In the 1960s and 1970s atmosphere of censorship and authoritarianism, he took the conscious risk of publishing literature about the Cuban and Sandinista Revolutions. And thanks to him, works like C. Wright Mills' famous *Listen, Yankee!* were made available to the Spanish-speaking public.

Mexico's public and government recognized the value of his work. In 1989 he was given the Aztec Eagle Medal, the highest decoration given to foreigners for their contributions to the Mexican people and nation. The UNAM also created the Arnaldo Orfila Prize in his honor, given yearly since 1993 to the most outstanding university publication.

Raúl Padilla, organizer of the Guadalajara Book Fair, perhaps the most important of its kind in Latin America, also recently announced that the 1998 fair would be dedicated to Don Arnaldo, in posthumous homage to his work and legacy, but above all in recognition of his spirit and attitude, the inspiration he is for all those who believe that the emancipation of Man, real freedom, can only be achieved through culture and education, and their main tools, books and reading.

Arnaldo Orfila not only lived 100 years. He was a good man who filled an entire century of culture and universal thought. For him, as a promotor of mass distribution of culture, there were no such things as nationalities, only languages. There were no frontiers other than those of human thought.

Perhaps this is why he always conceived of his contribution to publishing as the promotion of the values that unite mankind the most. For Arnaldo Orfila, being a publisher-editor always meant promoting and exercising tolerance and dialogue among peoples and individuals, authors and readers. ■■■

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