

# Alejandro Rossi

## The Generous Writer

(1932-2009)

Juan Villoro\*

Born in Florence in 1932, he was baptized in the church where Giotto built his bell tower. His mother was Venezuelan, descended from General Páez.<sup>1</sup> He liked remembering his ancestry in the chaos of Mexico City, where he came to study philosophy with José Gaos.<sup>2</sup>

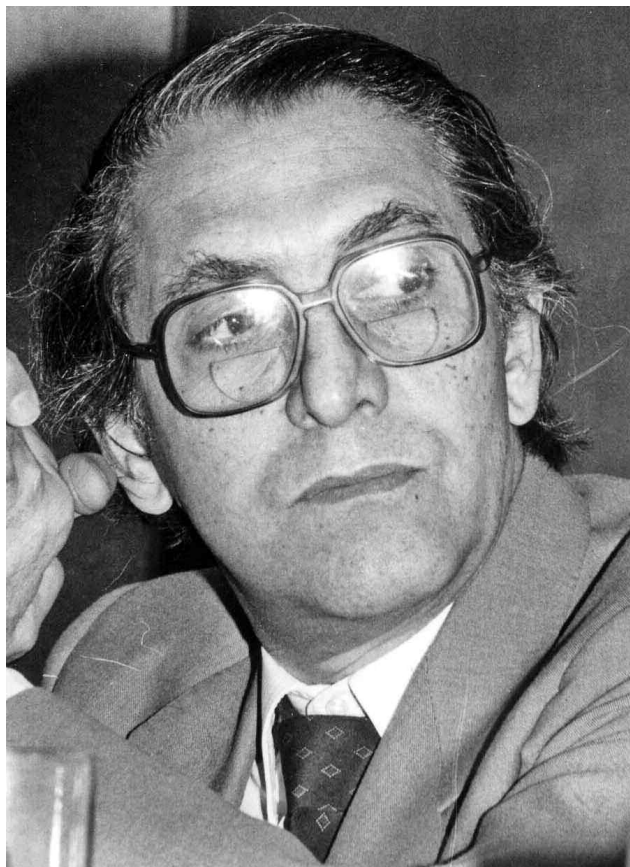
The grand passion of his life was the adjective, the descriptions that pin things down. When he would see himself in photographs, he would say, “I look like a pharmacist being punished,” or, “Here I look like a chiromancer gone mad.” He once said that a colleague looked like “a broken frog.” Even though no one had ever seen a broken frog, it was a perfect description. Far from any tedious desire to offend, he understood others as rough drafts to be refined.

It is not by chance that his first book was a meditation about words: *Lenguaje y significado* (Language and Meaning). Then he mixed reflection with tense, lively prose in the books *Manual del distraído* (Manual of Someone Distracted) and the short stories in *La fábula de las regiones* (The Fable of the Regions).<sup>3</sup>

His greatest artistic achievement was conversation on an extremely wide variety of topics: tennis, the intrigues of Vaticanologists, the TV series *24*, a poem by Montale. He dominated the room in social gatherings, but he listened with interest. If he got bored, he would take out coins and fondle them, a habit he had seen in a philosopher at Oxford.

He liked to read in the wee hours, when everyone else was already asleep, and he felt “like a cork in the water.” He enjoyed telephone calls, but put them off with impulsive protocols. You had to call him several times, and then he’d say, “What a bore!” and talk for two hours.

He loved women’s smiles and the elegance of their bearing. He liked to buy himself fine clothes and wear them out, with the lack of fussiness of someone uninterested in those



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things. He was very handsome, but he made funny faces for photographs; he wore glasses that didn’t suit him; he mussed his hair intentionally.

He felt he deserved awards, among other things because he criticized himself ruthlessly when he was down. He didn’t have a massive readership, but he received singular letters: an old warrior had discovered philosophy in *Lenguaje y significado*; a theologian was so dazzled by *El cielo de Sotero* (Sotero’s Sky) that he wanted to re-baptize the author in a “good-sized tub.” One time, he went to a bar with Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and some fans came up to him who didn’t know the Cuban writer. “That’s why you don’t write more,” said Cabrera Infante, “You’re doing just fine like this.”

\* Mexican writer.



Faithful to his sign of the zodiac, Virgo, he was hypercritical and felt “mistreated by the stars.” In vain he searched for an astrologer who could give him cosmic optimism.

He helped others in a complex way: looking for work, scholarships and improbable publications for them. He knew that generosity was a technique, not a sentimental consolation. Once he got something, he expected gratitude.

He admired people who knew how to apologize, particularly in a country where admitting a mistake is worse than making one. “Recognizing a mistake is not a moral defect,” he used to say. Asking for forgiveness seemed to him to be an exalted form of loyalty. He was polemical but not vengeful: “It’s no use imitating what you repudiate.”

He didn’t believe in grandmothers’ wisdom, the culture of Mom’s gentle “double-boiler” cooking, but he liked to create his own home-style mythologies: one o’clock in the afternoon was tequila time by the sun, and to go out on the highway, you had to eat a plate of papaya.

For him, the barbershop was a counterweight to the dentist. He was delighted when the master of the scissors would say, “How fast your hair grows!” after being with the doctor who would say to him, “How badly they’re treating you!” The barber compensated for the dentist in the same way that the chef compensated for the waiter. He was faith-

ful to the dishes from some restaurants, but pitiless with those who served them. Then, he would leave a munificent tip.

He always gave to beggars (“Charity won’t save the world, but it does help these poor devils.”), and he was irritated by itinerant salesmen.

“I started smoking because of loneliness,” he used to say, justifying the cigarettes he would firmly chomp down on. The best one was the first one in the morning, after his shower, with a damp towel around his shoulders. His father had smoked with no ill effects. “I thought I was the same,” he said during the hard years of emphysema.

I met him in my childhood. I came from a background where men and boys didn’t express their affection. In him, everything was passion, laughter and outrage. I found out something about myself that was hard to recognize: the possibility to love like he did, to the point of adoration. That’s how he loved Olbeth, his wife, his children, his grandchildren, his fast friends.

Alejandro appreciated the fact that in “Retrato de un amigo” (Portrait of a Friend), Natalia Ginzbur extolled Pavese based on their day-to-day dealings. He knew that description was a form of loving.

He accepted his fate serenely. “I’m like a planet going out,” he would say, resigned to his end, though never stopping being interested in what was going on in the world.

For 40 years I visited him with the same joy with which I would have visited the Beatles in Abbey Road. But I was always late. A little while ago I was on time, and he didn’t wait for me. “There are certain virtues you shouldn’t acquire too late,” he said. That was his last lesson.

“Good-bye, dear,” he used to say when leaving, with the smile of someone who knows he’s not leaving.

He hasn’t left. **NM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Venezuelan General José Antonio Páez (1790-1873) was three times president of his country and one of the most outstanding fathers of Venezuelan independence. [Editor’s Note.]

<sup>2</sup> José Gaos y González Pola (1900-1969) was a Spanish philosopher exiled in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War. He took out Mexican nationality in 1941 and was a professor at the UNAM from 1939 to 1969. [Editor’s Note.]

<sup>3</sup> Alejandro Rossi, *Lenguaje y significado* (Mexico City: FCE, 1969); *Manual del distraído* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1978); and *La fábula de las regiones* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1998). [Editor’s Note.]