

A SHINING MIND FROM MODERN MEXICO

The position of America and other essays. By Alfonso Reyes.—Translated from the Spanish by Harriet de Onís. 172 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$5.

Alfonso Reyes was one of a circle of young intellectuals in Mexico who, on the eve of the Revolution of 1910, gave expression to the intellectual and artistic quickening that accompanied that revolution. Others were Pedro Henríquez Ureña, José Vasconcelos, Antonio Caso, Martín Luis Guzmán and Diego Rivera. All have since attained continental reputation in the lands speaking Spanish and Portuguese. North of the Rio Grande, Rivera's name became famous because plastic art has the gift of tongues. Henríquez Ureña's literary scholarship won a place for him in our university circles. Vasconcelos's name made itself known chiefly because of his political exploits, and his many-volumed autobiography is at this moment in process of translation. The rendering of Guzman's "The Eagle and the Serpent" into English (by the same Harrie de Onís who translates the present work) established him here as a significant novelist. But the names of Antonio Caso, philosopher, and Alfonso Reyes, essayist and humanist, have been but rumors borne on the tepid, intermittent breezes of "Good Neighbor" cultural interchange. When, a few years back, it became known that many Latin American intellectuals were urging the name of Alfonso Reyes for a Nobel Prize, few Anglo-Saxons were able to say why Now Harriet de Onís and the publisher have combined in what must be gratefully acknowledged as a labor of love—for neither translator nor publisher could have based his effort on calculations of profit—to make available a selection of Reyes' essays.

They have been selected to give the discursive, wide-ranging thought of the author a special unity around the problems of America: "Vision of Anáhuac" (Ancient México); "Thoughts on the

American Mind"; "The Position of America"; "Epistle to the Pinzons" (the three brothers who piloted Columbus' ships); "Columbus and Amerigo Véspucci"; "Social Science and Social Responsibility (with special reference to America's use of European culture); "Native Poetry of New Spain"; "The Tenth Muse of America (the Mexican poetess, Sor Juana); "Luis G. Urbina" (elegy to a Mexican poet); and "Virgil in Mexico". Reyes' thought, like the chronicle of his life as intellectual, diplomat and traveler, moves out in a series of widening circles from its Mexican center: he is Mexican, Latin, Ibero-American, Continental American, European of the transplanted Europe of the New Continent, Citizen of the Republic of Letters and of the World, and practiser of "the profession that is superior to all others, the profession of being a man." He has been at home in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, New York, Madrid, Paris, Rome; he would have been at home no less in the Rome of Virgil and in ancient Athens. His thought moves in transparent, widening, overlapping, concentric circles from its Mexican center. The color grows more intense as we move toward that center, so that the best and most vivid essays are the most specifically Mexican: the "Vision of Anáhuac"; "The Tenth Muse"; "Virgil in Mexico". All the essays are suggestive, little spots of light shine from them as from fireflies in a wooded night; but those with the largest titles like "Thoughts on the American Mind" have the thinnest density and precisely because of their large promise leave us aroused but disappointed.

"Vision of Anáhuac", on the other hand, with which the volume opens, is a veritable poet's vision of the world of wonder of Aztec-Maya civilization as beheld by the first Spaniards when they broke into it. "Traveler," cries its epigraph, "you have come to the most transparent region of the air." The picture has the profusion of detail, the complex organization, the sense of analogy between hills and objects and men and all the lyricism that characterizes Rivera's murals of the same pre-conquest world. "From the barren, alkaline earth the plants raise the thorns of their vegetable claws, defending themselves against drought... the air glitters like a mirror... it is

like autumn the year round... the brilliant humming bird, the emerald trembler... the rocks replying to the sweet songs of the flowers."... In this setting man has organized a life full of splendor, passion, cruelty and "exotic" wonder. It is a world in which Dionysius would be more at home than Apollo, yet this Apollonian writer feels linked to it by the "common effort to master our wild, hostile natural setting" and by "emotions aroused by the same natural objects," emotions "without whose grow our valleys and our mountains would be like an unlighted theater."

No less characteristic is the closing essay which begins with the celebration of the two-thousandth anniversary of Virgil in Mexico, goes on to an analysis of Mexico's Latinity and ends with thoughts on the "Georgics" as the healing "program" of Mexico's agrarian revolution.

After the samples quoted above, it is hardly necessary to say that the translation is faithful and expressive. But a word should be added concerning the beautiful typography and design. It is a fortunate first introduction of one of Latin America's best known men of letters to the English-speaking world.

Reviewed by Bertram D. WOLFE.

Herald Tribune. Book Review.

New York, December 24, 1950.

VISITA A ALFONSO REYES

Llegar a México y preguntar a los amigos que nos rodean por Alfonso Reyes, es el primer trámite obligatorio para muchos escritores que visitan la gran ciudad. Y desde los últimos años, en que se supo que el maestro y generoso amigo había tenido algún trastorno de salud, ese interés ha crecido: "¿Cómo está Alfonso Reyes?"

Por suerte el maestro de las letras americanas superó cierta crisis circulatoria que hace tiempo le aquejara y su salud ya no da temores excesivos. Sin embargo, el informe primero que recibo de Chacón y Calvo, que ha llegado tres días antes, es que Alfonso está de vacaciones en Cuernavaca, pero había venido a la ciudad con motivo del Congreso de Academias de la Lengua, que a todos nos había convocado y reunido. Ya nuestro fraternal José María había tenido oportunidad, cuando nos informaba, no sólo de visitarlo, sino de pasar casi medio día en su casa, invitado a la mesa cordial, junto a Manuelita, la gran compañera y bibliotecaria insustituible, al punto de que sin ella no sabría a ciencia cierta dónde se encuentran muchos de sus libros, en la extensa, clara y nutrida biblioteca que es su casa.

Ahora también fuimos allí a saludarlo, aunque ya lo habíamos visto y cambiado algunas palabras en la propia sede de la Conferencia. Aunque oficialmente su intervención era mínima, el maestro había acudido una y otra vez al tanto de esa obligación de la cortesía, ya tan proverbial en el mexicano, pero de la que Alfonso hace culto, al punto de que uno de sus libros —libro encantador por cierto— tiene ese simple título: *Cortesía*.

Allí estaba Alfonso, siempre rodeado de admiradores y de amigos lejanos, para quienes saludarlo y conversar con el eminente hombre de letras era uno de los puntos esenciales de su programa en México. Porque no ya al llegar, sino aun antes de salir, ya en nuestro programa se apunta ese nombre, asociado siempre a lo mejor del país hermano.

Queríamos después despedirnos, y la voz de Manuelita nos invitó a ir en seguida a su casa un poco retirada, en Tacubaya, al extremo de la Avenida Tamaulipas, con señas muy concretas para que no haya pérdida, como ésta: "al llegar al cine Lido". Y Alfonso estaba allí esperándonos, a pesar de su mucho quehacer, de la correspondencia extensísima, de las pruebas siempre pendientes de revisar, de los libros en que está trabajando.

Los que hemos penetrado en su biblioteca, no podremos olvidar nunca la impresión que produce en el ánimo aquel amplio cuerpo, de altura como de dos plantas, todo tapizado de libros, que dan sus vistosos y variados lomos a la contemplación, entre diplomas y cuadros, y por acá y por allá, sobre estantes simétricamente dispuestos, objetos de arte, desde lo popular a lo de más exclusiva cultura. En larga vida de diplomático y de hombre de letras acumuló rarezas en todos los órdenes, que ahora lucen en esa iluminación maravillosa que entra por los cristales y baña los objetos y los espíritus. Allí, cuando por primera vez lo visitamos, fue una larga conversación en que participaban Cossío Villegas y Raimundo Lida, dos magníficos y fraternales amigos.

Ahora estamos solos. La conversación es sencilla, humana, apenas rozando los temas literarios. De pronto, una dama francesa entra en busca de una revista. *Commerce* tal vez. Allá está, en un lugar en que se alínean las revistas modernas de Europa. Acaso la colección estaría completa y podía hallarse el número buscado. Pero era una lástima que Manuelita no pudiera venir, recogida en su habitación por alguna molestia de salud. Y eso nos hizo pensar lo que siempre se piensa cuando vamos a visitar a Alfonso Reyes en su casa. No es propiamente una casa, sino una biblioteca en todo el rigor de la palabra, con unas cuantas habitaciones de vivienda disimuladas, que dan acceso al gran salón principal. Su mismo comedor es una pieza así, pequeña, sin lujo, meramente funcional.

En aquella casa lo que importa es el sitio donde se piensa, donde se escribe, donde se crean esos grandes libros en que el autor ha ido

dejando la huella más profunda de su vida, de sus experiencias literarias, de sus pesquisas y meditaciones, de su gran estilo vital.

Y salimos, como siempre, pensando en Goethe; pues ¿quién en nuestra América tiene más puntos de contacto que Alfonso Reyes con el gran animador de la cultura moderna? Como los viajeros del pasado siglo iban a Weimar para verlo y saludarlo, los viajeros que vamos a México preguntamos, antes que por ninguna otra cosa de interés, por Alfonso Reyes. Vamos a llevarle nuestro saludo y nuestra admiración.

Félix LIZASO.

EL MUNDO.

La Habana, 15 de Mayo de 1951.

ASPECTS OF ALFONSO REYES

Twenty-five years ago, more or less, when he was already firmly established as one of the greatest Hispanists of modern times, Pedro Henríquez Ureña registered a literary judgment which the passage of time has proven quite conclusively to be inaccurate. He wrote that the eminence of Alfonso Reyes as a man of letters was most keenly reflected in his poetry. This may have been true in 1927, but surely very few people today would agree with this opinion, since, in the score of countries where the name of Reyes is reversed by anyone familiar with contemporary Spanish American letters, Don Alfonso is regarded as one of the finest essayists ever to have written in the Spanish language, and the most outstanding humanist that Mexico, or perhaps any other Castilian-speaking country, for that matter, has produced in this century. It is true that the tone and tempo of many of his shorter prose pieces is imbued with the same inspiration that nourished some of Spain's finest lyricists, and that the color and wealth of Indian pageantry in his *Visión de Anáhuac* is not very far removed from poetry itself. However, over and above his superior accomplishments in the field of poetry, Alfonso Reyes is today rightfully recognized as a true descendent of Montaigne and Bacon and those who, after them, enriched the world's literature through their cultivation of the essay form.

Although his poetic output in volume is insignificant when compared with his prose writings, Alfonso Reyes nevertheless has studied and evaluated this genre with extraordinary ability. *De Poesía Hispanoamericana*, written in 1941, is a remarkable feat of conciseness and thoroughness in summing up the salient aspects of the modern period in Spanish American poetry. Equally compact and rich in facts, information, and recondite details qualities characteristic of all his critical studies is his summary of pre-Columbian letters, written as an introduction to his *Letras de la Nueva España*, his most recent work, published in 1948. Its section on the indigen-

ous poetry of the new world is probably the finest review of the maya-quiché culture to have been condensed within the boundaries of a literary study. In this book, Alfonso Reyes, with consistently enviable clarity of thought and language, offers a truly exquisite literary panorama of Mexican literature in its three centuries of colonial times.

La Experiencia Literaria, published in Argentina in 1942, may in many respects be considered Reyes' literary biography. In this anthology of essays, written at random over a period of several years, the author reveals more fully perhaps than in any other of his single volumes the infinite scope of his literary knowledge — classical, modern, and contemporary — of France, England, Germany, Iberia and Latin America, as well as the United States. Every one of the more than two hundred pages of this book contains at least one allusion to a foreign author; in some instances, there are as many as ten on a single page. Alfonso el Sabio shares honors with Mark Twain and Valery Larbaud in *Aduana Lingüística*, one of the most delightful essays on language barriers that has ever been written, and a truly noble defense, incidentally, of the language of Brazil, which to so many millions of *hispanoparlantes* is a "castellano estropeado"!

Ridiculing such a narrow-minded attitude, Don Alfonso says: "lengua cien veces ilustre la portuguesa. Ilustre por ser la expresión de una grande epopeya histórica que dejó sus huellas en todo el mundo conocido, y todavía supo abrir al esfuerzo humano nuevos caminos. Navegación y descubrimiento, civilización y conquista: tales las proezas del pecho siempre invicto lusitano . . . Lengua también ilustre por sus tesoros literarios, madruga a descubrir las formas de la lírica independiente cuando todavía no podía atreverse con ellas nuestro castellano central. El mismo rey don Alfonso el Sabio, que da su unidad a la prosa castellana, tiene que pasarse a la otra lengua vecina . . . cuando se ensaya en los metros líricos para cantar los loores de Santa María." In short, as far as Reyes is concerned,

"el que ama de veras la lengua castellana tiene que amar a la vez la lengua portuguesa."

From Aristotle to Zola, from Chaucer to Chaplin, the literary experience of Reyes is so broad that it defies comparison with the personal culture of any living writer. Undoubtedly, a great many of these allusions are meaningless to all but the best informed in international literature, ancient and modern: and since Alfonso Reyes almost never resorts to explanatory footnotes of biographical glossaries, a large portion of his writings cannot be fully appreciated by most people until they are made available in annotated editions. And what a great adventure awaits editors and scholars who will one of these days assume the labor of compiling the encyclopedia of proper names and titles in the *obras completas* of this formidable humanist and scholar, the most universal figure produced by Mexico or any other Latin American nation in the twentieth century.

Although Reyes has been translated into more foreign tongues than any other contemporary Mexican writer, according to one eminent literary historian of Mexico, very little of his creative versatility has ever been revealed to English-language readers. In fact, the first volume of his writings was published here less than a year ago, when ten of his essays were translated under the title of *Position of America*. Unfortunately, although the translation was made by Harriet de Onís, who has dedicated herself, more than any other North American, to eliminating the language barrier between the literary cultures of the two Americas, the choice of essays in this collection will not bring Reyes closer to many *estadounidenses*. More human, less abstruse pieces would have been more appropriate for this debut: for, although Reyes has demonstrated his excellence in the philosophical interpretation of history, this particular facet of his many-sided genius is not the most representative of his combined originality and universality, qualities that should be present in any article—material or intellectual—that is to be successfully exported. More representative of Reyes than the essay *Posición de América*, chosen for the title of the English translation, would have been one

like *Discurso por la lengua*, also in the collection *Tentativas y Orientaciones*. Certainly, *Pasado Inmediato* known to everyone south of the United States who has had the slightest contact with Reyes' work, should have been included in the English volume.

Notwithstanding these personal opinions which, after all, transgress on the area of *de gustibus*, *Position of America* contains the finest essay that has so far been written about Alfonso Reyes. Done by Federico de Onís, an intellectual intimate and personal friend of the Mexican during the latter's first sojourn in Spain in the years preceding the first World War, and a very close friend since that time, it is an almost perfect word portrait of Don Alfonso, the gentleman and scholar. The opinion of many who have followed Reyes' development ever since the publication of his first book in 1911, would concur with that of the Onís when he writes that "after forty years of constant and copious literary activity, Reyes stands as the most universal of writers in the Spanish language, perhaps as the most achieved example in any literature of the international citizen of the world of classic and modern letters."

Walter BARA.

Hispania, November 1951,

Vol. XXXIV, N^o 4.

The Choate School,

Wallingford, Conn.