

ALFONSO REYES

Alfonso Reyes must be the most Latin of all Latin-Americans; but unlike other leaders of Latin-American civilization he has his roots firmly planted in Greek. He has not been the first to do that. Bolívar, the Liberator, was seldom without his French versions of Homer and Plutarch. Rubén Darío had a vision of Greece through the windows of Versailles; Enrique Rodó was led to a more genuine Greece by Leconte de Lisle; Lugones apparently translated Homer himself. Alfonso Reyes, at the age of twenty when he was supposed to be reading law, sat up in an attic looking over the roofs of Mexico City to learn Greek and read it. "In 1908", he says, "I was reading the Greek plays on Electra . . . Those words came from far away yet were close to me, seemed part of my surroundings; and the books, witnesses of so much affection and despair, became confidants and counsellors . . ." Literature (he explains) did what it was meant to do in providing a cure or treatment, without which he might have been wrecked in the whirlpools of adolescence. "I do not know whether this is the true meaning of humanism; my *Religio grammatici* may seem too sentimental; but once we have found a standard we have a right to use it in any way we can". (1)

Now that he had justified his passion for Greek as something that mattered in life, it was as if he had created a miniature Greece for his own use: one that was permanently his. He could venture among Greek things naturally, with no fear of romantic archaism, or of what he called "lyrical compromises" between those days and ours. An example of this life-long passion is the admirable translation of *La Iliada* which began to appear in 1951, and the delightful commentary in sonnets *Homero en Cuernavaca*.

The "Latin" of his Latin-Americanism must be taken literally

(1) Comentario a la *Ifigenia cruel* (1923); *Obra poética, México* (1952), pág. 295.

too. Ever since the Spanish arrived on the American continent there have been people among them who read the Latin language with pleasure and wrote it with elegance, particularly in Mexico and Colombia. The best Mexican poet of the eighteenth century, Rafael Landívar (born in Guatemala), wrote entirely in Latin; and for that reason his long poem in classical hexameters, *Rusticatio Mexicana*, is more alive today than it would have been in neo-classic Spanish *octavas*. The expulsion of the Jesuits by the government of Charles III hindered the development of Latin studies in Mexico. Yet Padre Hidalgo, the paladin of Mexican independence, might have been a character out of Virgil, and a copy of the Valencia edition of Virgil (1777) with Spanish translations facing the Latin, discovered lately in Mexico City, may actually have belonged to Padre Hidalgo himself, for three of the five volumes bear his name or the name of someone else called Hidalgo. This edition contains prose translations of the Eclogues, Georgics and the first six books of the Aeneid attributed to Luis de León—a fact which seems to have escaped most commentators except Ochoa. His verse translations are known, but the authorship of this translation in prose has been dogmatically denied.

"I cannot mention Padre Hidalgo", Reyes said at the Mexican commemoration of Virgil's two-thousandth birthday, "without stopping to express the charm I find in this truly Virgilian figure. He was well read, and had caught a breath of that Jacobin spirit which was blowing through the world from France. His enemies called him *afrancesado* 'Frenchified', which in those days was equivalent, more or less, to what now would be called a 'red': a man of new and subversive sensibilities. He was well aware of the commotion going on in Europe; but, from close by, he seemed an affable parish priest: not too severe with his neighbours or too exacting with the moral lapses of human nature—a good Christian, in short".

Padre Hidalgo was a sociable man, a village philosopher, a great talker; but he was also studious, full of intellectual curiosity and enterprise, and not averse from manual labour. The absur-

ditities of the economic and legal systems of the colony prevented him from growing what he wanted to grow. In vain he tried to plant vines, breed silk-worms; the government rooted up his vineyards and cut down his mulberry trees, and it may have been opposition from Spanish officials which first opened his eyes to the meaning of the movement which was pointing towards independence. "So", Alfonso Reyes said, "we can imagine him equally well with a plough or a sword, like the heroes in Virgil. His gentleness should not deceive us. An inner fire consumed him, and soon set the whole country in a blaze... That is how he appears to us in that golden episode of our Mexican Aeneid, calling his parishioners at midnight with sticks and machetes by ringing his church bell, and bringing on the social revolution that was to lead to his own death. This Virgilian union of agriculture and poetry was the dream of Padre Hidalgo; but (Reyes adds) we have not realized it even yet". "Latinity", he says again, "is not only a historical force but an evolutionary one". "Already in my time we students no longer learnt Latin. In the seminaries—which we in Mexico call the colleges kept by priests—one had to accept their barbarous *latinajos*; but most of us passed from one lay school to another without ever meeting with Latin of any kind, which seemed to us *antigualla de iglesia* (old junk of the Church). Personally", he continues, "I should like to see Latin provided for those on the left wing; for I do not see the advantage of giving up conquests already achieved, and I should like the humanities to become the natural vehicle for everything that is autochthonous in Mexico". (2)

Latin achieved Mexican independence through social revolution. Sometimes however it was merely repetitive. The storm which broke on Padre Hidalgo was to break again a hundred years afterwards on the contemporaries and friends of Alfonso Reyes; and Mexico entered once more on a period of civil war with

(2) Discurso por Virgilio, *Tentativas y orientaciones*, México (1944).

all its horror and degradation. Nowadays a European can understand what that meant in terms of war, but only a Mexican can realize the full horror of it. Most foreign critics have too little historical imagination or too little sympathy with the country, or they have been misled by sectarian propaganda. No criticism of Mexico is justifiable from citizens of other nations unless they realize that for twenty years, at the beginning of this present century, the country was in a state of war, inter-war, and post-war: "wars worse than civil", *bella plus quam civilia*. Of course there were "lawless roads"; of course there was "robbery under law". We do not need best-sellers by popular English authors to tell us that. "They took my garden", an old lady said to me; "but I can still grow my plants in pots". That is typical Mexican stoicism, worthy of the choruses of Greek tragedy, which Reyes noted "preach submission to the gods; that is the great, clear lesson in ethics to be derived from the ancient Greek Theatre.

Few Mexicans were able to profit by it however; and by 1917 the poet Enrique González Martínez stood almost alone in maintaining some steadiness in intellectual outlook. For the writers, too, were involved in the war. If not in the actual fighting (though they often were) they served in official agencies and government offices—the most deadening form of war-work possible for an imaginative writer. We in Britain, at any rate, have found it so. The return of the Mexican painters from Paris in 1914 led to the great Mexican school of murals; but the writers became involved in war subjects, and it is still too soon to estimate the real place of talented novelists like the authors of *Los de abajo*, *El águila y la serpiente*, or *Se llevaron el cañón para Bachimba*. González Martínez kept his head, and his classical serenity—at a price; and later it was he who, remembering Verlaine and what he had said about rhetoric, called upon all poets speaking Spanish to wring the neck of the swan—*Tuércele el cuello al cisne*—the symbolical swan of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rubén Darío. During the war in Mexico, however, his poetry was a longing for

Y quiso la soberbia azul de la montaña,
soberbia que no escucha, orgullo que no deja
llegarse a la plegaria, mientras la humana queja
ansiosamente surca los ámbitos vacíos.

Or he could console himself with the memory of how

un acre olor de polen contaminó los vuelos
de las nocturnas auras.

López Velarde, an older contemporary of Alfonso Reyes, found poetry in a Mexican country-town at peace (*La bizarra capital de mi estado*), and then again in a village when war had passed over it and shattered it; (*El retorno maléfico*) but he died too early to write much or devote his delicate talent to these things.

Alfonso Reyes was in Europe when the Mexican civil war began. His father, General Bernardo Reyes, was a distinguished soldier who, when governor of one of the northern states (Nuevo León), had proved an efficient and enlightened administrator, and had even introduced a workmen's compensation act. There was a powerful *Revista* party, and at one time Bernardo Reyes was considered the most likely successor to Porfirio Díaz in the presidency. He was killed early in the war. His son, Alfonso, always remembered the rambling sunny house at Monterrey, in a poem which falls with a peculiar thrill on ears that are English, from its unconscious echo of the 17th century thinker and poet, Thomas Traherne:

Todo el cielo era de añil;
toda la casa, de oro . . .
Cada ventana era sol,
cada cuarto era ventanas.
Los corredores tendían
arcos de luz por la casa.
En los árboles ardían
las ascuas de las naranjas,
y la huerta en lumbre viva
se doraba.
Los pavos reales eran
parientes del sol. La garza
empezaba a llamear
a cada paso que daba . . . (3)

(3) "Sol de Monterrey" (1932), *Obra*, 121.

There was no point in his returning home immediately; soon there was no home to return to. "In the last flood", he wrote, "the river carried away half our garden and the stables at the bottom of it. Then the house fell down, and the family were scattered. After that came the revolution . . . I went abroad with my fortune on my back and a star (my own) in my waistcoat pocket. Then one day I heard that they had cut off my livelihood; and then the four years' war broke out in Europe."

For the next ten years Alfonso Reyes lived the life of a wandering scholar in France and Spain. His first book of verse, *Huellas* (written between 1906 and 1919, and published in 1922), includes poems dated from Mexico and others from Madrid. The first are more "impersonal"; essays in initiation, a Spanish critic, Díez-Canedo, called them, written, like those of his predecessors, under the shadow of Rubén Darío and the Mexican poet of the generation before, Manuel José Othón. Where Mexico appears most clearly is in the poems which reflect the Spanish seventeenth century. They are Spanish in their general appearance; but like many buildings in Mexico, the Spanish lines are altered and softened, above all in the ornamentation. They are less severe, less grave; a soft profusion of decoration adds to the lyrical quality and changes the pitch. The Madrid verses, on the contrary, hardly allude to Spanish things or Spanish landscape; they are *modos del ánimo*: states of the spiritual self, the soul as against the mind or intellect.

He saw through the superficial romanticism of the foreigners' Spain more quickly than most, and wrote a superficially romantic poem about it: *Las quejas: Sátira de los expatriados*. (4)

The poem, frivolous though it may seem, has a double descent from Virgil and Góngora. Alfonso Reyes became associated with the poets and scholars who rediscovered Góngora's poetry. He lived at the famous Residencia de Estudiantes at Madrid, and worked with the group of researchers who formed the Centro de Estudios

(4) *Las quejas: Sátira de los expatriados* (1917, *Ib.*, 60).

Históricos. He contributed to the *Revista de Filología Española* under Menéndez Pidal, a review which, in those days, had a standard second to no review of its kind anywhere. The texts of the Spanish classics were generally in a deplorable state; he prepared several valuable new editions, and was among the first to realize the nature of the textual problems with which the editor of Góngora is confronted.

By 1924 Mexican affairs had steadied, and Alfonso Reyes was put in charge of the Legation in Paris. The appointment was justified; a succession of important diplomatic posts followed, ending with the Embassy in Río de Janeiro. He was a good diplomatist, and took his profession seriously at a time when elder statesmen in Europe were behaving with unbelievable folly; but he never gave up writing, and produced admirable occasional prose, a valuable body of criticism, and poetry which has never had justice done to it. We should not be misled by its apparent light-heartedness. The urbanity concealed a deeply sensitive nature, and a feeling for his fellow men, revealed more often by chance remarks in conversation than in the prose and verse which he allowed to be printed. He did not like his mind to appear in public in shirt-sleeves. He had an elegance of thought unusual in his period. The callousness of some inter-war writers did not touch him; everything he wrote shows a finely sensitive mind trained to respond sympathetically to all the intellectual currents of his time.

Different countries have affected his poetry in different ways. He responded to Spain in the light-hearted, anti-romantic manner of *Las quejas* — the “complaints” already illustrated — and to the fanciful Toledan legend of *El mal confitero*. (5)

The best of his early memories of Mexico are found in the poem *Infancia*: cazadores, jinetes, vaqueros, rurales, improvisadores, cervecedores, gentes de fragua, mineros, “tigres, peones y barreteros”. (6)

(5) *El mal confitero* (1918), *Ib.*, 63.

(6) *Infancia* (1934), *Ib.*, 126.

Another poem of childish memories came from the reflexion of the sun in a bucket of water: *La vieja lira*. (7)

A return to Mexico in 1924 produced surrealist visions like *Golfo de México*, *Viento en el mar* (8) and *Caravana* (9) and *Hierbas del Tarahumara*, a vision of the Tarahumara Indians, the finest poem he has ever written. (10)

The critical opinions of Alfonso Reyes deserve attention. His more specialized contributions are to be found in the two volumes on Spanish literature, *Capítulos de literatura española*, in *El Deslinde: prolegómenos a la teoría literaria*, and in his large and important book on ancient criticism and rhetoric. But with regard to Spanish-speaking America he wrote the following: “Arriving late at the banquet of European civilization, we live by leaping over whole periods; hastening our step and running from one form to another, without having had time to mature the one which came before. Sometimes the leap is daring, and the new form has the look of a dish taken from the oven before it is properly cooked.” (11)

Tradition weighs less heavily on Spanish-speaking people in America than it does in Europe; but that tradition is still Latin. The spirit of Mexico depends on “the tint which the Latin waters have acquired by the time that they have reached us in our home, after flowing for three centuries and washing the red clay of our Mexican soil.” Even thinkers in Britain, he says, “surveying the scene from the opposite shores of race and language, do not hesitate to recognize that in the upper storeys of their own national formation the corner-stones came from Rome. The idea of Latin civilization is wide and elastic; it extends beyond the barriers of seas and continents, religion and language.”

(7) *La vieja lira* (1940) *Ib.*, 170.

(8) *Viento en el mar* (1924), *Ib.*, 89.

(9) *Caravana* (1924), *Ib.*, 90.

(10) *Yerbas del Tarahumara* (1929), *Ib.*, 99.

(11) *Sur*, Buenos Aires (1931), Núm. 24.

After quoting from his own exquisite Spanish translation of *The Ebb Tide* of Robert Louis Stevenson (*La Resaca*), the episode of the broken-down Englishman reading a tattered school Virgil on a South Sea Island, he adds: "This is the true image of a moral Robinson Crusoe; starting to rebuild the ruins of his emotional life on some verses of Virgil... The Latin words give the man his place again."

With good reason, Virgil appears to Mexicans a voice from their own country. From him they learn that nations are founded in sorrow and shipwreck; "In the adventures of Aeneas going from shrine to shrine to save his household gods, I know many Mexicans who have thought they saw the image of their own misadventures; and I doubt whether we should call him a good Mexican who could read the Aeneid without being deeply moved by it. The reading of Virgil acts as a ferment on the idea of one's own country, gives it a deeper meaning; with a Virgil in one's hand, one could go down to Hades and return to tell the tale... Do not break the precious instrument! If you do, you will be disarmed while the rest of the world is in process of transformation... Latin is a good ship to travel in, and one must look out for storms."

Virgil is the poet of all peoples. Dr. T. J. Haarhoff has explained what the poet means in the experience of South Africa; and an Australian poet once remarked: "How could a people of sheepfarmers not read the Georgics at school!" For centuries it was believed that Virgil had foretold the birth of Christ; now it seems that the tale of the Trojans in Italy was like the Spanish conquest of Mexico. The poem of the conquest is in fact the Aeneid, and the adventures of Aeneas might be illustrated by engravings from those books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which relate the travels and adventures of the conquistadores: the audiences with *caciques*, the penetration into unknown countries by rowing up the rivers; indeed most things that happened to the Spaniards in Mexico seem to have happened before to the Trojans by the Tyrrhenian Sea. The events of the Aeneid are of shorter range than the opening up

of America; but there is a poetic relationship between Aeneas and Cortés, and between the *caciques* of Latium and the Aztec emperors.

Alfonso Reyes thinks the comparison might be carried farther. In an article published in 1930 he pointed out the likeness between the attitudes of Montezuma to Cortés and King Latinus to Aeneas. (*Tentativas y orientaciones*, 30-31).

Further, the Mexican emblem — the eagle perched on a cactus with a serpent in its beak — commemorates the Indian tribes wandering in the wilderness until they found the lake, the mountain, the cactus and the serpent. There is a curious likeness between the Mexican story and the simile in the eleventh book of the Aeneid, describing how Tarchon, the Etruscan picks Venulus, the Latin, off his horse, carries him off and kills him as he rides. (*Aeneid* XI, 751-6).

This characteristic piece of Mexican heraldry reappears in one of the later *romances* of Alfonso Reyes and in two sonnets. He had been living for some years at Río de Janeiro, happier and more at home than anywhere else in the world. There are poems in the collection called *Romances y afines* (1945) to prove it. *Ciudad remota* reflects the mood of return to the austerity of Mexico City and the severe beauty of the valley of Anáhuac, 2500 meters above the sea.

Entre espadas de cristal
que tajan tu luz radiosa
¿de dónde tanto misterio,
México, ciudad remota?

Vuelo de un águila un día
que en sus garras desabrocha,
sobre el peñón de la fábula
las semillas de tu historia... (12)

It was difficult to settle into Mexico after Río de Janeiro.

Mercedes, Río, mercedes,
soledad y compañía,

(12) *Ciudad remota* (1938), *Obra*, 139.

de toda angustia remanso,
de toda tormenta orilla.

Y porque nunca pensé,
y porque yo no sabía
que hay en el mundo una raya
donde el mundo es lejanía;

una zona en que las sienas
se curan de las espinas,
y el mismo dolor se envuelve
y a sí propio se acaricia... (13)

The sense of mutability, with perhaps a recollection of some lines in *Le cimetière marin* of Paul Valéry, was in his mind when finishing the poem *Vaivén de Santa Teresa*:

¡Eso que anda por la vida
y hace como que se aleja!
¡Eso de ir y venir, eso
de huir y quedarse cerca!

¡Eso de estar junto a mí,
y hace años que estaba muerta!
¡Eso de engañar a todos
como Zenón con su flecha!

Se enlaza el tiempo en la voz:
la canción tiene pereza.
Con ágiles pies, los ángeles
se dejan venir a tierra.

—Voladora y quieta luna,
garza de sí misma presa,
entre arabescos de hojas
va y no va, rueda y no rueda. (14)

The long history of México had its bitter moments; the two sonnets, *Cara y cruz del cacto* bring out two sides of that history.

En lugar del olivo virgiliano,
la planta de cuchillo y de ganzúa,
y el árbol sirve de potencia y grúa
para izar por el cuello al hortelano.

¿Por qué brotan del suelo mexicano
la cólera, la víbora, la púa,

(13) Envío (1932), *Ib.*, 343.

(14) *Vaivén de Santa Teresa* (1932), *Ib.*, 330.

la espadaña que en pica se insinúa,
la garra en guante adentro de la mano?

Torva mitología nos espera,
y el crudo mineral nos solicita
más allá de la miel y de la cera.

Y la alquimia es adusta de manera
que la sangre en tezontle precipita
y sube en amarilla tolvanera.

The other view, the other side, is summed up in the second sonnet:

Así, serpiente reposada, grave,
hecha cristal de su primer delito,
sorbida por el cacto de su mito,
vacunada en su duelo con el ave. (15)

Two late poems, *Silencio* and *Consejo poético*, give with delightful urbanity his views on the art of poetry. (16)

CONSEJO POETICO

La cifra propongo; y ya
casi tengo el artificio,
cuando se abre el precipicio
de la palabra vulgar.
Las sirtes del bien y el mal,
la torpe melancolía,
toda la guardarropía
de la vida personal,
aléjalas, si procuras
atrapar las formas puras.

¿La emoción? Pídelas al número
que mueve y gobierna al mundo.
Templa el sagrado instrumento
más allá del sentimiento.
Deja al sordo, deja al mudo,
al solícito y al rudo,
Nada temas, al contrario,
si en el rayo de una estrella
Logras calcinar la huella
de tu sueño solitario. (17)

(15) *Cara y cruz del cacto* (1939), *Ib.*, 248.

(16) *Silencio* (1943), *Ib.*, 179.

(17) *Consejo poético* (1943), *Ib.*, 180.