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A COLOMBIAN POET IN NEW MEXICO

Joaquín Ortega

BY REQUEST of the editor I am introducing to the readers of this review a Latin American poet who has come to enrich the literary panorama of New Mexico—Alfredo Ortiz-Vargas. He was born August 15, 1898, at Bogotá, Colombia. At the age of fourteen he was brought to Canada, where he pursued for six years classical studies at the Collège St. Laurent of Montreal, and St. Thomas College, Chatham, New Brunswick. This rigorous discipline, which Ortiz-Vargas still remembers with awe, was followed three years later by an extended sojourn in Europe—France, Belgium, England, Spain. In Madrid he published his first book, *Lejanas . . .*, the imitative poetic flight of a young man overburdened by reading and suppressed desires.

From *Lejanas . . .* (1922) to *Las Torres de Manhattan* (1939), his excellent poem about New York, there was a copious labor as journalist and contributor to leading literary periodicals: two weekly articles for the Pan American News Service; literary sketches for *El Debate* and editorials for *El Gráfico* of New York City; an editorship of *Cromos*, the largest literary and social magazine in Bogotá; original "Sonetos del Canadá Francés," published in *Nosotros* of Buenos Aires; critical studies on the Latin American poets Gabriela Mistral, Leopoldo Lugones, and Guillermo Valencia for *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, *Bulletin of the Pan American Union*, and *Poet Lore*. Some of the earliest of this work is now gathered into a book, *Crepúsculos Lluviosos*, which he has submitted to a publisher. This collection includes a series of unpublished poems, "Fagua," inspired by the memory of the ancestral family *hacienda* located a short distance from Bogotá:

. . . my sweet land of Fagua;
 amidst the shadow cast by your hills
 my soul reposes.

His most recent literary activity has consisted in several translations for *Selecciones*, the Spanish edition of the *Reader's Digest*, and an exquisite series of critical sketches (still in progress) of the leading American poets, Archibald MacLeish, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edgar Lee Masters, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Robinson Jeffers, in the *Revista Iberoamericana* under the general title of "Perfiles Angloamericanos."

The New Mexico Quarterly Review is giving in this issue two pieces on Spanish themes by A. Ortiz-Vargas, both as yet unpublished. One is printed in Spanish and another in the English version of Dr. Quincy Guy Burris, his friend and colleague at Highlands University. Dr. Burris has also made a translation of *Las Torres de Manhattan*, which our School of Inter-American Affairs hopes to be able to put out in the near future.

As a poet, Ortiz-Vargas belongs more to the prewar than the postwar generation, in spite of the fact that he came to literary life in the years immediately following the first world war. This is due more to temperament than to deliberate choice. He is essentially a *modernista*, but strongly "humanized"—so to speak—by the years of his scholastic training in the classics. Another profound influence which has rectified much of the formulism of his *modernista* self has been that of American poets, who have injected intellectual realism, substance, and meaning into his phrasing. Ortiz-Vargas is at times perhaps a little too eloquent to satisfy the ears of the latest devotees of the imagistic cabala, but he has descriptive power, felicity of instinct, warm Christian sympathy (see his touching presentation of the "East-siders" in *Las Torres de Manhattan*), and cosmopolitan sweep.

Manner is by no means the test of poetic values. The important fact to record here is that Ortiz-Vargas hears the hidden voices of things and is able to convert them into lines that shine with fervor and dignity. There is an internal music in him which affects even his personality. After half an hour of conversation with this gentleman of the Muses—for he is an aristocrat in breeding and in learning—one realizes the import of the term "vocation." He is a born poet, and that is the reason why he has not been able to do very much of anything else—try as he may.

The classics, which first came to him wrapped in the austere atmosphere of religious schools where tradition was a sacred word, did not remain drowsy in him. In the course of his never-too-prosperous and roving life, man's past became for him not a cult for escape but a means of probing present realities; and it is men, suffering flesh and bone, not concepts, that have waked his mind and his heart.

It is a pleasure to welcome to our literary scene this man who, while conversing with the ancients, shapes verses in the pure Castilian so well preserved in his birthplace. Ortiz-Vargas brings to New Mexico also an idiom impregnated with Spanish and Anglo-Saxon reminiscences and apt at the same time for catching the homely everyday realities. We invite him to pour his poetic self into this bare and honest land as he has already done with singular talent in lands as different as our eastern states, Canada, Flanders, Spain, and Colombia.