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Alfonzo Reyes, 1889-1959

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THE DEATH of Alfonso Reyes on December 27, 1959, has left an empty chair in Mexican literary circles which will not easily be filled by anyone within view at the present time. His not unexpected departure was the last of a series of grave losses suffered by Mexican letters during the tragic year 1959; among the other literary figures that preceded the great essayist and poet one finds the names of José de J. Núñez y Domínguez, Heliodoro Valle, a Mexican by choice, and the brave warrior José Vasconcelos.

Of course, all four of the writers above listed had lived a full life and one could say that their work was completed. However, it cannot be denied that José Vasconcelos and Alfonso Reyes were producing at a youthful rate up to the time of their death; Núñez y Domínguez was less active in the literary field when he died of cancer, while in the diplomatic service in South America, and Valle spent his last days in a mental penumbra. But Vasconcelos and Reyes, both victims of heart attacks, were fortunate in that they possessed their mental power to the end.

Alfonso Reyes
1889 — 1959

BY GERARDO SÁENZ

Alfonso Reyes may be considered the last of the great Mexican writers that were formed during the final days of the Díaz regime. It seems ironic that most of the prominent men in Mexican letters have appeared under the most adverse political circumstances. It is true that since the Revolution of 1910 some good writers have entered the literary stage, however, none show signs of attaining the stature of a Vasconcelos or a Reyes, to mention only two of the many well known names that date back to the dictatorship. And it is interesting to note that while Vasconcelos was ever the aggressive fighter for justice, Alfonso Reyes preferred to be the conservative meditator who believed that he who survives is right.

Perhaps because of his conservatism, not a few people criticized Reyes for locking himself in an ivory tower and ignoring the struggle for justice in which his country was engaged for long years. Others criticized him for devoting too much time to the Greeks and the Romans instead of writing about

Mexico. And yet, Alfonso Reyes, a humanist in the fullest sense, was interested in his country and loved his fellowmen. He wrote about Mexico and Mexicans with loving care, but he believed in looking to the past in order better to be able to meet the present and the future. This attitude characterized him from his earliest years.

Those who had the good fortune to know Alfonso Reyes and to hear him talk were always impressed by the kindness he radiated and the way his gentle voice made one feel at ease in his presence. Truly he was a humanist who not only studied man but loved his neighbor as well. During the Revolution, when his father was killed and his brother went into exile, Alfonso Reyes felt obliged to place a notice in a Mexico City newspaper to explain that he was not involved in any political intrigues and was interested only in pursuing his literary work. This, at the time, was not a happy position to take and he thus left himself open to censure by the Revolution; however, he did not waver and before long he found himself in the service of his country, not killing his fellow countrymen but in the diplomatic corps. He believed that he who survives is right, and, having survived, he proved to be right.

Ever the humanist, Alfonso Reyes employed one wing of his two-story duplex home for a library. At the north end of the large room he had a small balcony where he would spend most of his day after he began having heart trouble. And it was there that he received many of the friends that came to see him in Mexico City. Often he would spend a few days in the pleasant climate of Cuernavaca, but his heart was in Mexico City and he would always return to his beloved Tenochtitlán. Toward the last he was engaged in cataloguing his library. With the help of his wife and his daughter-in-law he was not only making the catalogue but sending any duplications to the library which bears his name in Monterrey, his birthplace.

Since the death of Alfonso Reyes, his son has announced that the library will be opened for service to the public. Thus, even after death, with his writings and his library the name of Alfonso Reyes will continue to live in Mexican literary circles. He was poet, essayist and literary critic, all in great measure. But to those who knew him, he will always be the great humanist whose generous hand was ever willing to open locked doors for those who needed to enter. And when we enter the library at Benjamín Hill Núm. 122, we shall look to the small balcony at the back, and there, at his desk, we shall remember a friend, don Alfonso Reyes.