

## AN INTRODUCTION FOR STUDIES ON RODÓ

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In an atmosphere of pessimism and negativism in the western world at the end of the last century, there appeared in Uruguay a spokesman for new optimism and affirmation, José Enrique Rodó. Critic, essayist, thinker, and humanist, and the embodiment of his own highest ideals, he manifested an unusual faith in the potential within the inherent, spiritual nature of man.

He made his first impression on Hispanic American intellectuals in 1896 with such penetrating articles as "El que vendrá" and "La novela nueva," which heralded the evolution of thinking of the new generation of men whom he was to call "new idealists." In the former work he describes the vacuum in which his generation found itself with the fall of Positivism as a scientific explanation of the universe and with Naturalism's inadequate conception of human existence, a vacuum filled with doubt, hope for guidance providing the only weapon for escape. In "La novela nueva" he speaks of new directions which seek to sound the realities of life and the profundity of consciousness.

These represented only two of several articles contributed by Rodó and his three fellow founding editors to the *Revista Nacional de Literatura y Ciencias Sociales*, evolutionary in bringing together fore-runners and moderns. Although the magazine naturally reflected the positivistic background of its young editors, such anti-positivist names as Verlaine, Mallarmé, Ibsen, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, and D'Annunzio were appreciatively cited.

"El que vendrá" and "La novela nueva" were republished the next year as the first of three volumes under the auspicious and indicative title *La vida nueva*. The second

of the series two years later, 1899, contained a masterful critique of Rubén Darío's *Prosas profanas* and provided an insight into Rodó's thinking at that moment. He declares himself a part of the reaction in thought at the end of the century which, while departing from literary Naturalism and philosophic Positivism, led, without detracting from what these had of worth, to higher conceptions. He sees Darío's art as one example of contemporary anarchical idealism.

Appropriately the third, *Ariel*, connoting anticipation, appeared in 1900, precisely at the turn of the century. It predicted a renaissance in thinking for Spanish Americans individually and collectively and, although diversely interpreted by the populace, it, in itself, accomplished that renaissance. While indirectly bringing in Europe and the United States, Rodó, through his venerable *raisonneur* Próspero, who was bidding farewell to his students, places his own hopes ostensibly in Spanish American youth, where, in turn, he envisions hope for the future. He exhorts these youths to recall the traditional idealism of their culture, to think optimistically and freely and in terms of classic values, and to avoid seduction by the material progress of the positivistic-thinking example to the north.

His active spiritual tolerance, plus his concern for *lo cotidiano*, next called him to write a series of articles opposing a move to abolish crucifixes in the hospitals. His reasons were collected in 1906 under the title *Liberalismo y jacobinismo*. While demonstrating a superior capacity for debate, he pleads for a *human* approach to reality and illustrates the complexness of individual and social sentiments, appreciation of which would always be the basis

of education or reform.

Between 1904 and 1909 he created, in all that word implies, his most thoughtful and mature work, *Motivos de Proteo*, a book, like life and ideas, in perpetual evolution. If *Ariel* were a conch on the beach, then *Motivos de Proteo* would be what the shell sings when put to the ear. Here Rodó, the humanist, attempts to fathom nature's most nearly perfect work, man, who is constantly reforming himself and being reformed in time. The basis for study is the individual's calling or vocation, and the point of departure is the importance of exploring one's inner self, this last in order to conquer one's self and to form and perfect the personality.

Three citations from Carlos Real de Azúa's special study of the work merit inclusion here:

Sobre la ondulosa vida psicológica de la *movilidad*, la *multiplicidad*, la *vocación* y la *voluntad* tres operaciones (cada vez más ceñidas, cada vez más exigentes), *renovación*, *reforma*, *conversión*.

La tónica esencial es (seguramente) la del *humanismo* . . . apoyado en una profunda convicción, en una fe casi religiosa en la grandeza, la profundidad, la diversidad del hombre. . . .

La nota esencial de este humanismo rodoiano es, sin duda, el *inmanentismo*.

Clásica majestad y levedad moderna lo filian—dualísticamente—en dos líneas bien visibles: el academismo, el modernismo.<sup>1</sup>

Much of Rodó's own personality can be seen through the diverse works contained in *Mirador de Próspero* (1913), a collection of the products of about two decades of literary activity, which constitutes something like a diary of his spirit. Here are purely literary essays, historical essays, social, moral, and critical essays, as well as some on purely Spanish American themes. Particularly outstanding then for its contribution to Spanish American criticism was an essay of literary history, "Juan María Gutiérrez y su época."

Some of Rodó's best in style comes forth as he finds himself in 1916 on his cherished trip to Europe as a traveling correspondent

for *Caras y Caretas*. As would be expected, his insight is much deeper than that commonly found in travel literature. His articles, including such titles as "Una entrevista con el Presidente de Portugal" and "Una impresión de Roma," were posthumously collected in 1918 under the title *Camino de Paros*.

Following the author's death in 1917 members of his family and a friend, Dardo Regules, attempted to organize the manuscripts left in his library. These were published in 1932 under the title *Últimos motivos de Proteo*. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, who has had available to him these manuscripts, Rodó's correspondence, and other miscellanea in the Archivo de Rodó, shows errors of classification and placement in the family's edition. From the correspondence and from a similarity of thought, he shows that Rodó probably originally intended some of this work to be included in the earlier *Motivos de Proteo*. Study of manuscripts which were included in the *Últimos motivos de Proteo* is still under way, and Rodríguez Monegal concludes that no definitive statement of Rodó's intentions is possible now.<sup>2</sup>

Besides these principal works, letters, prologues, and miscellanea, there exist diverse articles from such periodicals as *El Telégrafo*, *Diario del Plata*, and *La Nación*; discourses in parliament; speeches such as those before the Club Libertad, the Club Vida Nueva, and the Círculo de la Prensa; and such major addresses as the one at the centennial of Chilean independence, in which he advocates harmony among nations of his continent based on common inheritance and environment.

From these and from comments of those who knew him, Rodó, the man, emerges, a very human personality and a humanist, an intellectual aristocrat with a consistently elevated appreciation of this life. He has been called critic, *maestro*, thinker, philosopher, and poet. To a degree he was the incarnation of all of these. To separate

him into such categories is to dismember him. Rodó himself would be the last to take an abstract and divine creation such as a personality and reduce it to ordinary terms. He would attempt to fathom and re-create it in its essence, perhaps, again, abstractly and divinely. Those who would attempt to delimit the nature and morality of an individual are missing one of Rodó's own main points: that a man, a critic, an artist are entities of diverse facets or vocations. To operate on man without proper awareness and concern for the body's fullness and complexities is to kill him.

As a poet, in the strict sense of the word, Rodó wrote only a few pieces which have been published. (Others exist in his private papers.) In the larger sense, his was certainly a poetic spirit. His practices and his theories go to the depths of a lyric poet with language, images, metaphors, and parables as exterior manifestations. As a worthy critic of poetry, of necessity he shared the feelings, stresses, and joys of his subject.

If mere quantity of production were not enough to make him a critic, then quality would. He is capable of panoramas such as "Juan María Gutiérrez y su época," of particularizations such as "Los 'Poemas cortos' de Núñez de Arce," and of mixing the two, as in *Rubén Darío*. He embodies his own prescription for a critic, containing such ingredients as tolerance, fullness of background, and subjective and objective balance. He recognizes the historic and aesthetic value of criticism and his own is one of the early steps in his land in carrying forward and molding it. Perhaps one of the best ways to exemplify his type of criticism would be to compare him with Francesco De Sanctis, using Croce's praise as a base:

Gustave Flaubert wrote to George Sand: 'In your last letter you speak of criticism, and say you expect it soon to disappear. I think, on the contrary, that it is just appearing over the horizon. Criticism to-day is the exact opposite of what it was, but that is all. In the days of Laharpe the critic was a grammarian; to-day he

is a historian like Sainte-Beuve and Taine. When will he be an artist, a mere artist, but a real artist? Do you know a critic who interests himself wholeheartedly in the work itself? They analyse with the greatest delicacy the historical surroundings of the work and the causes which produced it; but the underlying poetry and its causes? the composition? the style? the author's own point of view? Never. Such a critic must have great imagination and a great goodness of heart; I mean an ever-ready faculty of enthusiasm; and then, taste; but this last is so rare, even among the best, that it is never mentioned nowadays.' Flaubert's ideal has been worthily reached by one critic only (that is to say, amongst critics who have given themselves to the interpretation of great writers and entire periods of literature) and that one is De Sanctis.<sup>3</sup>

Rodó was that type of critic. Therefore, other evaluations become secondary. It has been stated that his contribution to literary criticism was not sufficiently original and important to continue calling him the indisputable critic of America<sup>4</sup> and, in the opinion of some, perhaps it was not. In the opinion of others, however, someone else would have to be found to supersede him. It would have to be proven that his work was not original or important and that it has not been used as a basis by later critics; also whether, finally and after all, the limited title of "critic of America" is even sufficient.

As a philosopher, if that title connotes the delineation of a fixed system, he cannot be given it. His friend Victor Pérez Petit advises against thinking of Rodó as such.<sup>5</sup> Alfredo Colmo attacks his philosophic thought as "truisms."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Rodó's name has been thought of in relationship with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Boutroux, and Bergson.<sup>7</sup> Certainly he touches on philosophic matters and possesses philosophic insight.<sup>8</sup> Our appreciation of Rodó as a philosopher endorses the synthesis most properly stated by Rodríguez Monegal: "Rodó no podía pensar con rígida continuidad filosófica; su pensamiento desconfiaba íntimamente de la sistematización que canaliza el fluir natural de la vida; aunque intelectual, no era meramente razonador y se apoyaba en un sentido intuitivo de la vida como realidad

superior."<sup>9</sup>

As for his thought in general, those who delight in the impossibility of finding something new under the sun have classified Rodó as not being original. Again, if "originality" limits itself to something new in the absolute, then Rodó was probably not original. Nor does he pretend to be. He lived a life of observation, meditation, self-education, and broad reading, a background which he recommends for mankind in general, and artists in particular. Important to him, as to the men of the Renaissance, whom he admired, was what newness could be given to assimilated knowledge, a spontaneous but disciplined type of originality. It is questionable whether where he obtained his knowledge is more important than what he chose for consideration and the use he made of it. Much of what he says is at least known to mankind in general. His purpose and fulfillment in stimulating and directing lie in bringing to our attention and developing the vast potential which exists in each one of us. To do this he may rely on someone else for the initial thought but the method is original for him as it must be for every mind except that of a plagiarist. (One feels that the opinion of Alberto Zum Felde is a bit extreme: Rodó was not a thinker but a literary glosser.)<sup>10</sup> Gonzalo Zaldumbide most aptly states that what Rodó did was "actualizar lo eterno, desentrañar de lo cotidiano la originalidad constante, que se renueva en el seno de la multitud. . . . Si sus ideas no son nuevas, el sentimiento que las temple, la convicción que las reanima, la forma en que se encarnan bajo su pluma le son peculiares e inalienables."<sup>11</sup> Another accurate evaluation comes from Pedro Henríquez Ureña:

Ha hecho prorrumpir en su elogio las voces del solar clásico de España, con hipérbolos no tributadas á ningún otro pensador americano. Como pensador, posee, si no la originalidad que cree un sistema filosófico, sí la del eticista; en vez de dejarse arrastrar por la corriente que lleva á la ciencia fácil, á hacer libros con libros ajenos, vuelve á la clásica tradición que enseña á buscar

en la propia experiencia, íntima y social, las verdades morales que deben darse al mundo como fruto acendrado de la personalidad, como aportación real al tesoro de la sabiduría humana. Es, en suma, un maestro, con la aureola de *misticismo laico* y el ambiente de silenciosa quietud que corresponde á los pensadores de su estirpe.<sup>12</sup>

Since the late 1940's and particularly in the late 1950's the "real" Rodó has been emerging in criticism, following periods of exalted praise and exaggerated adverse criticism. His early successes had been immediate. The literati observed a new brilliance in his scholarly articles in the *Revista Nacional*. . . . and the general public, exceedingly enthusiastic about the message it interpreted in *Ariel*, eagerly awaited his next book. Already in 1910 Pedro Henríquez Ureña classified him as perhaps the first in Spanish American culture to influence with only the written word.<sup>13</sup> *Ariel* underwent numerous re-printings, both in Spanish America and in Spain where its author was praised by Leopoldo Alas, Salvador Rueda, and Unamuno.

The Spanish Americans who grew up in close association with the teachings of Rodó, however, became his severest critics in their maturity. Representing this post World War I group were Zaldumbide, who began an attack the year after Rodó's death, Zum Felde, Luis Alberto Sánchez, Colmo, Alberto Lasplacas, and Ventura García Calderón. Their reflections on his work convinced them that his teachings were not adequate for the rapid social progress they desired, and they attacked him for lacking the very things he extolled—action, for example. They warned that actually Rodó's thoughts were not close to life or to the Spanish American need, and that following him would sterilize action in youths and make them discreet conservatives. They wanted precise rules of conduct, whereas Rodó put forth general ones, and they sought outside direction in renovation, whereas he felt each man should map his own course. They found

his suggestions enigmatic, "too literary," and decorative but not profound. Worst, from Rodó's point of view, they referred to him as dilettante.

José P. Massera, Uruguayan philosopher and a contemporary of Rodó's recognized the limitations of such criticism, and, as early as 1920, wrote of Rodó's critics,

Todas las críticas que se le han dirigido, y las que concebimos por ahora, como posibles, han partido de abajo: de una escuela, de un sistema, de un sectarismo, de algo que puede ser noble y sincero, pero que, por su naturaleza misma, obra dentro de los siempre estrechos límites de un aspecto de las cosas, de una faz de lo real, y no tiene acabada conciencia de su imperfección, por ser una paralización del tiempo y una limitación que se pretende definitiva de lo indefinido.<sup>14</sup>

The ultimate value of the exaggerated adverse criticism was that it brought Rodó down from the heights of being adulated into a light where he has been considered more impartially in Spanish America since World War II. Articles by Roberto Ibáñez showing a true understanding of Rodó appeared in the 1940's, but vastly more far-reaching was his organization of the Archivo, which brought into focus the suffering and other aspects of the life of Rodó not pronounced in the latter's published works. Next, Rodó was situated in the history of his nation's thought by Arturo Ardao, particularly in a history of Uruguayan philosophy of the second half of the nineteenth century, published in 1950, and another on the twentieth century, 1956. Finally, in 1957 there appeared studies by two of the finest, sincerest, and most impartial scholars of Rodó, Rodríguez Monegal and Real de Azúa, both of whom had published works on him previously. In that year, Real de Azúa, who pays tribute to earlier studies by Luis Gil Salguero and José Gaos, brought forth a prologue to an edition of *Motivos de Proteo* in which he analyzes originally and learnedly not only the book itself but also the import of the various circumstances surrounding it. Rodríguez Monegal's contribution

was the first *scholarly* edition of Rodó's complete works and to it he added—all equally competent—an introduction, notes, and prologues to the diverse offerings included. Both Rodríguez Monegal and Real de Azúa are more concerned with authoritatively analyzing Rodó and his works than in judging him, but the judgments they do make merit citation here at some length. Real de Azúa explains:

Rodó ganó su fama con opiniones, con ideas vertidas en ensayos, en artículos, en manifiestos y en su discurso arielico, sobre todo. Ganó su fama con opiniones vertidas en una forma hermosa, consciente y deliberadamente hermosa, en una prosa que buscaba la armonía expresiva, el movimiento y el número, el relieve de la imagen, de la parábola, de la comparación. Me parece que refleja Rodó un momento muy especial de la evolución literaria, . . . un momento en que las técnicas de la poesía y la prosa poemática (ya invadida por la primera) irrumpen en todos los géneros literarios, en todos los modos de la expresión de las ideas.

No creo que hoy un escritor pudiera llegar a la altura de Rodó con una obra de su tipo . . . porque esa obra no responde a una necesidad, a una demanda profunda.<sup>15</sup>

Rodríguez Monegal thinks *Rubén Darío* and *Ariel* "sirvieron para fijar el nombre de Rodó . . . como el del primer crítico literario del habla y uno de sus más perfectos ensayistas."<sup>16</sup> His respectful, well-founded opinion of Rodó is:

Visto en su totalidad, el balance de su obra y de su acción le sigue siendo favorable. . . . Lo que da estatura a Rodó y lo levanta sobre sus coetáneos de habla hispánica y confiere inigualada perdurabilidad a su obra es esa perspectiva que se alcanza desde su obra. Escribiendo en un reducido puerto del mundo occidental, en una ciudad que tenía poco más de un siglo, en la nación más pequeña de la América del Sur, ensangrentada aún por guerras civiles, Rodó alzó su vista por encima de los accidentes y proyectó su palabra sobre todo el mundo hispánico. Lo que pensó y dijo estaba pensado y dicho a esa escala. Esa fué (es) su hazaña.<sup>17</sup>

Four decades after the death of Rodó it becomes possible to consider him impersonally and, employing a critical attitude which he helped further, to weigh what he did represent, rather than what he did not. In a geographical region and in an intellectual and artistic atmosphere ripe

for new thought at the turn of the century, his messages became prophecies to be approached with almost divine respect. When the men nurtured in his thoughts began to consider them as doctrine, however, they reacted strongly against him, largely from the point of view of personal prejudices. Nowadays, thanks to recent scholarly impartial studies, to the Archivo de Rodó which reveals his private life, and to a new tolerance in criticism, one considers him dispassionately, yet appreciatively.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carlos Real de Azúa, "Prólogo," *Motivos de Proteo* de José Enrique Rodó (Montevideo: Ministerio de Instrucción Pública y Previsión Social, 1957), Vol. I, pp. xl, xli, cxv.

<sup>2</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal (ed.), *José Enrique Rodó: Obras completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1957), pp. 867-873.

<sup>3</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Noonday, 1956), p. 368.

<sup>4</sup> See William J. Berrien, "Rodó, biografía y estudio crítico" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 1937), pp. 219-220.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Pérez Petit, *Rodó, su vida, su obra*, 2d ed. rev. (Montevideo: Claudio García y Cia., 1937), p. 288.

<sup>6</sup> Alfredo Colmo, "La filosofía de Rodó," *Nosotros*, xxvi (May, 1917), 173-184.

<sup>7</sup> By Leopoldo Zea. See Arturo Ardao, *Espiritualismo y positivismo en el Uruguay y filosofías universitarias de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1950) p. 288.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Monelisa Lina Pérez-Marchand, "José Enrique Rodó, escritor de signo filosófico," *Aso-mante*, xiii (Oct.-Dec., 1957), 51-67.

<sup>9</sup> Rodríguez Monegal, *José Enrique Rodó: Obras completas*, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Alberto Zum Felde, "José Enrique Rodó," *Crítica de la literatura uruguaya* (Montevideo: Maximino García, 1921), p. 154.

<sup>11</sup> Gonzalo Zaldumbide, *José Enrique Rodó, su personalidad y su obra* (Montevideo: Biblioteca Rodó, 1944) pp. 35 and 44.

<sup>12</sup> Pedro Henriquez Ureña, "La obra de José Enrique Rodó," *Conferencia del Ateneo de la Juventud* (México: Lacaud, 1910), p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> José P. Massera, *Estudios filosóficos* (Montevideo: Artigas, 1954) p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Real de Azúa, "Rodó y su pensamiento," *Marcha*, May 7, 1954, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Rodríguez Monegal, "El caso ejemplar de Rodó," *Marcha*, May 6, 1955, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Rodríguez Monegal, *José Enrique Rodó: Obras completas*, p. 136. To that quoted from Real de Azúa and Rodríguez Monegal might be added an opinion by Ermilo Abreu Gómez which appeared in 1950.

"José Enrique Rodó es uno de los escritores de mayor capacidad polifacética que ha producido la América moderna. Pero esta diversidad que, en algunos, podría revelar, precisamente, falta de hondura en el pensamiento, un como querer deslizarse sobre los temas, rozándolos con la palabra y el sentir, en Rodó es la expresión más firme, más arraigada, de su preocupación espiritual. Las diversas materias de que trata son—bien miradas—tan sólo aspectos externos, contingentes, de la substancia humana que anhela aprisionar con claridad y sentido." ("Dos notas críticas inéditas: José Enrique Rodó y Andrés Bello," *Armas y Letras* [Nuevo León] vii, no. 3 [March, 1950], 1.)

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