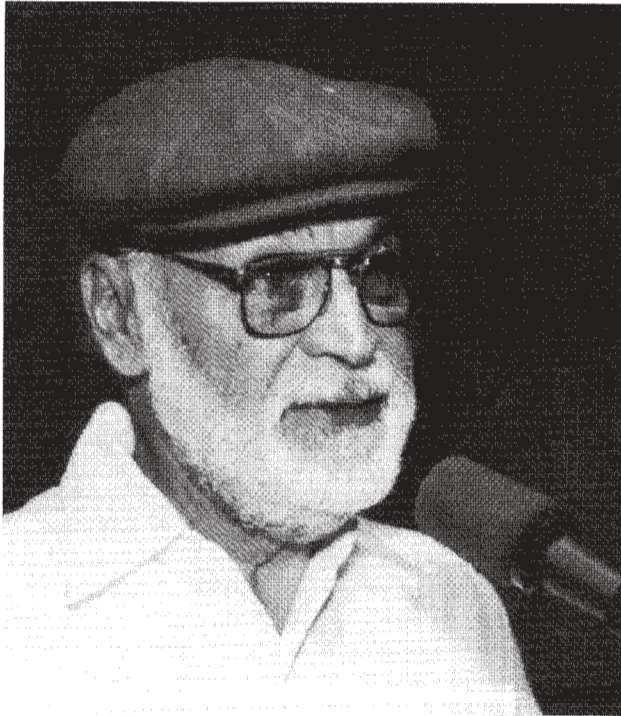


ENCUENTROS



*Society and Poetry:
Those Who Come
Wrapped in a Blanket*

Lecture by

Roberto Sosa

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SOCIETY AND POETRY: THOSE WHO COME WRAPPED IN A BLANKET

Roberto Sosa

To the Memory of Roberto Armijo

After the very first phrase was pronounced—*Fiat Lux!* (Let There Be Light!)—poetry became a tree of words; a tree surrounded by a sort of fog, watched over by cherubim armed with blazing swords. The tree emanates a continuous flow of signs, symbols, and languages of the speaking world universe. From there, finally, writing comes about as if by enchantment. It comes as a signal endowed with a “supra-literary energy that pulls man along to the thresholds of power and magic,” as Barthes suggested when he alluded to that written reality known as “style.” In other words, writing is the full exercise of an artist’s freedom at the tip of his fingers, perhaps the last of his full-bodied mirrors.

From this perspective, society and poetry, considered together, are equivalent to the distance between crying out—the gesture and gaze filled with longing—and the sentimentality of the sonnet, “Pesca de

sirenas” (Catch of Mermaids) by Juan Ramón Molina. (I am referring to the systematic decoding of the plot in the denouement, before the edelweiss flower is cut for her and no one else.)

Who are the poets? I am certain that they come into the world wrapped in a blanket. The *enmantados*, or “the ones wrapped in a blanket,” according to the Honduran myth, are born predestined to make others happy to the detriment of their own happiness. This allegorical fiction may stem from the role of the tribal witch doctor who was a spiritual guide, immortal poet, and exegete of the human dawn. The social tides cast them to the shore and transformed them into organizers of historical data, like Homer, the blind poet, who wrote twenty-four books. In *The Divine Comedy* (which consists of one hundred cantos in linked tercets), Dante Alighieri judges and condemns his main enemies to live out their lives in hell.

In the Middle Ages, public entertainers appeared and recited texts with themes recalling memorable events. These common people, known as *juglares* or minstrels, practiced to become masters of *juglaría* (the popular, narrative verse of minstrels), as opposed to masters of *clerecía* (a more learned, erudite verse). In medieval Spain, both forms of expression would influence one another to the detriment of the *cuaderna vía* (quatrains with fourteen syllables in each line). Let us recall, in passing, Gonzalo de Berceo's refined poetry, such as the universally known "Un vaso de bon vino" (A Glass of Good Wine).

For the same reasons that all empires, past and future, have fallen and will fall, the Roman Empire collapsed, ushering in prolonged armed struggles to construct new European nations. These wars were described in long narrative poems: *The Nibelungs*, *The Song of Roland*, and *El Cid*. At that time, creating a book was work done to win a place in heaven, and was a purely decorative endeavor.

Later, recruited by the nobility, the intellectual gave way to the courtier, the soft hand-kisser who, even though circumstances induced him to navigate with a fool's flag, was the delectable master of palace intrigue. Friar Antonio de Guevara described the courtier in the following terms: "He must be patient (armed and even lined with patience). Like the rogue, he has no honor. The courtesan is the free woman who allows herself to be courted." The courtier-intellectual is, I note parenthetically, equal to the classic counter

image of the organic thinker.

The cultural shock brought on by the discovery, conquest, and slavery of the indigenous peoples of the Americas has resulted in both attacks on and defenses of that historic event. Yet one should acknowledge the work of the Spanish friars to save important elements of the indigenous civilizations. Friar Bernardino de Sahagún translated hymns to the gods and held the artistic value of those works in high regard. Father Francisco Ximénez copied and transcribed the *Popol Vuh*, considered the Mayan Bible.

Poets and writers who came to the Americas included Juan de Castellanos (1522–1607), the author of the longest poem in the Spanish language, "Elegía de barones ilustres de Indias" (Elegy of the Celebrated Barons of the Indies). This poet, according to Enrique Anderson Imbert, used the words *bohio* (hut), *macana* (Indian club), and *jagüeye* (pond). The word *canoa* (canoe) was the first indigenous word incorporated into the conquistador's language.

The Ibero-American modernist poets expressed their feelings about the foreign presence. Rubén Darío called Christopher Columbus the *desgraciado almirante* (disgraceful admiral). In contrast, José Santos Chocano, in his poem "Los caballos de los conquistadores" (The Horses of the Conquistadors), admired the beasts on which the Iberian conquistadors were mounted:

Even more praiseworthy
than the immortal odes
is the horse with which Soto

skillfully,
spinning caprioles
as he well knows how to do,
astonishes, startles, and shocks
everyone,
and into the Indians' circle,
with no one
making a gesture of reproach,
reaches the throne of Atahualpa
where the horse's lather splatters
the imperial insignias.
The horses were strong!
The horses were agile!

The westernization of indigenous cultural structures proceeded on the basis of the medieval world view of Christian imperialism. The musical cadence of the hendecasyllable, classified as the sweetest meter in the Spanish language, was branded onto the New World Hispanic soul.

The glorification of bourgeois society is the glorification of industrial society. The artist, in this cultural context, is neutralized by the cult of the machine and wishes only to harass the bourgeois and frighten him. The artist is even, as Michel Ragón adds, relegated to a ghetto and converted into something cursed.

Reality has been, is, and will be the basic backdrop of real art: that is the key point. The artist, the poet, has the inescapable duty to create a work evocative of the changing fluid of reality for the ethical and aesthetic benefit of his society. A work of art, by itself, is meaningless without eyes to see it and nerves to feel it. It rests in its room as if awaiting its other

half, whether reader or observer, whom it slowly engages, until the ultimate possible beauty emerges.

Artists, like all regular citizens, work, eat, and defecate; they enter and leave hospitals as victims of contagious diseases, they contract debts which they sometimes do not pay, for as Oscar Wilde taught them: debts are the perfume of life. Some of them, in rare cases, live from stealing. They love and they hate, and they are loved and hated viscerally. The balance of the contradictions between objective and subjective reality is the focus of greatest tension for artists, because their work is subject to the most varied and strange interpretations; for example: "No one lives from letters"; "You cannot eat books"; "Musicians are bums"; "All actors are gay and all actresses are prostitutes." These things are said with all the seriousness in the world. These prejudices have been herding the creators of art into a category of second class citizenship.

Plato himself believed that poets were "guests from the fourth insanity." Writers and poets, outside of their creative fields, face the extra-literary dilemma of leaving their homeland or staying; adapting or rebelling. They can show off, with provincial pride, the golden livery of the intellectual henchman at the service of the powerful, or they can take a vow of economic chastity and not crumple beneath the unanimity of entrenched mediocrity. Staying entails being fascinated by either a fast or slow suicide along the forked path of miserable wages and dissipation. Leaving the land of one's birth may cause

a change of perspective on the soil beneath one's feet, and result in a stupefaction that stems from idealizing one's native land as seen from abroad.

Along the Central American isthmus, the marginalization of artists has occurred time and again since the last years of the nineteenth century. The cultural scenarios have changed on the surface, but not within. Rubén Darío and Juan Ramón Molina left us, respectively, two testimonies on what they experienced. The Nicaraguan poet tells us,

Sickened and frightened by the social and political life that keeps my native country in a pitiful state of embryonic civilization (and which is no better in neighboring lands), I found a magnificent refuge in the Republic of Argentina, in whose traffic-ridden capital I encountered an established intellectual tradition and a setting that was more receptive to my aesthetic abilities.

Let us read Juan Ramón Molina:

In an environment like our own, of blind aggression or indifference, the real intellectual has two ways to save himself from death by asphyxiation: either he arrogantly isolates himself in his ivory tower, enveloped in a cloud from which he cannot see the municipal geniuses who garner all the cheap glory at retail prices; or he is beheaded—as if he were the sacrificial lamb in a holocaust to art—on his altar of patiently accumulated verbiage.

The socio-cultural picture sketched in broad terms by Darío and Molina, the most important poets of Central American modernism, is not exclusive to early twentieth century Nicaragua or Honduras. The salient features of that situation have not lost their relevance. On the contrary, the parallel lines of such circumstances come together when the political and economic interests of a corrupt and denationalized minority meet the suffering majority that has been stripped of its dignity and given nothing in return.

Men and women who are dedicated to creating art survive within that sub-world as best they can. They are found principally in the Central American capitals, which are nothing more than electrified hamlets with façades where one can read, engraved on the frontispiece of Nietzsche's inferno, "Nothing is true and everything is allowed."

1492, 1914, 1939, and 1956 are the dates that mark the beginning of the most pitiful rendings of the human conscience, and contain the painful codes that form the foundation of the current world view. This world view impels the art generated by those historical events. The brutality of those deeds has horrified beauty as much then as now.

As for the creators of art, the awareness of the loss of an individual and social existence leads them to an interpretation that projects bifocal images, touched by the aura of alienation that reflects both the mutilators and the mutilated. Perhaps this is why they are once again considering polished stone as a deadly weapon.

Roque Dalton wrote:

Why did they not allow me
to be silent in the midst of
laughter?
Why did they hang the little
blue puppy?
Why did they pierce the ears of the
handsome old tailor to whom someone
gave their spare gold?
Then only I found a way to cry,
surrounded by a silence
capable of anything.

The poet is or should be a servant of his people, of their memory. This is what the poet has been since the days when he lived in a cave of solitude, almost mute, in a time when a real reindeer was not distinguishable from a drawing of a reindeer, when he contemplated a far distant future.

Poetry, which I will call the gateway of the word through the passage of time, has contributed to the global and simultaneous configuration of the human community in both historic and prehistoric times, and has influenced the lives of all of those who inhabit and have inhabited this vessel, Earth. This primordial function makes the creator of art a contributor to the historical process, working within an orderly reconstruction of events, linked by vessels evocative of life, in an open struggle against the inventors of human emptiness—people for whom the ideal civilization would consist of an automaton and a remote control.

In opposition to that inverted view of reality are the true poets, who are protected by their conduct which is impervious to the prevailing anti-values with their dual moral codes. For the creation and the creator are two sides of the same coin. The opposite idea, as Professor Einstein would say, “recalls the smile of a cat that is not there.”

Roberto A. O. A. J.

SELECTED POEMS

The Most Ancient Name for Fire

Happy are the lovers for they own
the grain of sand
that carries the weight of the center of the seas.

Hypnotized by the play of water
they only hear
the music from the scattered sounds of their names.

United,
clinging together like frightened little animals
that sense they are about to die, their limbs trembling.

Nothing is strange to them.

For them, against wind and tide
only words that embellish have meaning
for everything that exists: I love you, together until the end
we will grow old together.

Male and female crows will pull out their eyes,
beautiful expressions, including the moon in the mirror,
but not the fire,
from whence the lovers will again emerge.

The Sweet Salt of the Word Poetry

From fire, to begin with,
the gods of the first man
who saw him and loved him, were making a woman,
all by themselves.

Trembling, they sculpted her absolute breasts,
the waves of her hair,
the cup of her sex, more complicated within
than the interior of a sea snail.

They traced the shadow of her shadow with steady hands,
the curve and bite of fire at play
that tastes of virgin red beneath the tongue
and raises
the sudden beauty of embers in her eyes.

From then on, with her body,
one could touch modesty in flesh and bone.

I say woman,
the sweet salt of the word poetry.

This Light of Mine

What I write
is born from my travels to the stillness of the past.
From the seduction
I feel from the flames of fire
just like
the first men who saw it and tamed it
to the gentleness of a lamp. From the source
where death found the secret of its eternal youth.

I am moved
by the tiny decapitated cries
of frail animals as they lay dying. Consumed by love.

From the same wound, it comes to me as well.

From the ice that circulates in the darkness
that some people project from their mouths onto my name. From the center
of derision and indignation. From the circumstance
of my great commitment,
this light of mine survives as best it can.

Empty Piano

If, by chance,
you decide
to look for me,
you will find me
tuning my music box

Then you will
hear
the song that I usually sing
at twilight:
carefully, you destroyed
my homeland and wrote your name in secret books.
And you turned us
into scarecrows.

If, by chance,
you decide
to look for me,
I will be waiting for you
with my silence of empty piano.

The Poor

The poor are many
and that is why
it is impossible to forget them.

Surely, at dawn,
they see
many buildings
where they
would like to live with their children.

They can
carry on their shoulders
the casket of a star.

They can
disturb the air like furious birds,
cloud the sun.

But unaware of their treasures
they come in and out through mirrors of blood;
they walk and die slowly.

That is why
it is impossible to forget them.

The Old Pontiac

At its best,
the old Pontiac
opens up into a garden.

Before,
that is a very long time ago,
it pretended to be a gentle tiger gliding white
among beautiful women.

Nowadays
the noble beast grows old, with dignity and without haste
until the end of time...
And from its doors and windows
little wildflowers lean out.

Simple Elegy

I have walked far.
Little by little the untimely hour draws near.

I touch the armless cross
Yes
you are there under the anthills.
I want to gather up the dust of your hand, lift it, kiss it
and confess to you something that is knotted inside me.

Everything
falls down and I call your name as sweetly as I can.

I have walked far, my father,
far.

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Roberto Sosa was born April 18, 1930, in Yoro, Honduras. He is considered one of the most important figures in Honduran letters. His books have been fundamental in the formative process of Honduran poets writing in the twentieth century.

Roberto Sosa has published eight books of poetry: *Caligramas* (1959), *Muros* (1966), *Mar interior* (1967), *Los pobres* (1969), *Un mundo para todos dividido* (1971), *Secreto militar* (1984), *Máscara suelta* (1986), and *El llanto de las cosas* (1984) as well as *Prosa armada* (1981). He is a member of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language and his greatest distinctions have been the First Award from the Escuela Superior del Profesorado "Francisco Morazán" (1967), the Juan Ramón Molina Prize (Honduras, 1967), the Adonais Poetry Award (Spain, 1968, for *Los pobres*), the Casa de las Américas Award (Cuba, 1971, for *Un mundo para todos dividido*), the Ramón Rosa National Literature Award (Honduras, 1972), the Ramón Amaya Amador Award (Honduras, 1975), and the Itzamna National Literature Award (Honduras, 1980).

Along with this brilliant work, for several years Sosa has engaged in an effort to analyze and evaluate facts, people, and ideas which make up the historical and cultural reality of Honduras. Roberto Sosa is a founding member of the journal *Prisma*, and from 1964 to 1987 was the director and editor of the journal *Presente*, published in Tegucigalpa. In 1979 and 1980 he directed the newspaper of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, *Presencia Universitaria*. He was also professor of literature at that university from 1982 to 1983. From 1975 to 1990 he was the director of *El 100 pies cojo*, the literary pages of the Tegucigalpa daily newspaper *Tiempo*. He has been a juror for the Casa de las Américas Award (Cuba), the EDUCA Award (Costa Rica), the Leonel Rugama Award (Nicaragua), and the Ricardo Miró Award (Panama).

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