

JUAN LISCANO: VENEZUELAN POET AND EDITOR

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CANADIANS have lived on the fringe of a rich and extensive continent. We consider "America" and the "United States," generally speaking, one and the same geographic area, culture, economic and political empire, but to the 140,000,000 who live beyond the Rio Grande the term "United States" may signify either the United States of North America, the United States of Mexico or the United States of Brazil. We think of the "Latin-Americans" as one people, but they distinguish between Canadians, "Estadounidenses" (United States citizens) and English—rarely, if ever calling us "Anglo-Americans" although we are, more or less, a British race living in America. Latin Americans admire and respect Canadians. They think us a valiant people because we defied Hitler during those early war years when the Nazis reigned triumphant; a politically mature and sagacious people because we won our independence from Great Britain without forfeiting our friendship with the Mother Country and without violent or prolonged revolution; an industrious people because we have transformed our country into an industrial power within a very short time. Our foreign policy seems logical, and reasonable, and therefore they seek our friendship. Their picture of Canada is much clearer in their minds than is ours of their Republics, peoples, customs, governments.

Latin Americans resent our considering their many countries as more or less one geographic area and culture. The Chileans, for instance, very much dislike being identified with the Paraguayans. The latter take virtually no interest in Great Britain—beyond exchange of formal diplomatic courtesies—but many young Chileans travelled nine and twelve thousand miles to enlist with the RCAF and RAF during the London blitz, while the present trade policy of the Chilean Government is materially helping Great Britain to recover her markets in Latin America, and consequently her political influence. In an effective and discreet manner, His Excellency General Arnaldo Carrasco, the present Chilean Ambassador

*Of the National Museum of Canada. Senor Liscano has this year published a valuable book of essays, *Folklore and Culture* (Editorial Grafica, Caracas, Venezuela), dealing with folklore in general and Venezuelan folklore in particular: folk poetry, Afro-Venezuelan music and religious ritual, etc.

to Canada, constantly exerts his every influence to better Chilean-Canadian friendship, a friendship on which our delegations to the United Nations have sometimes relied. But to most Canadians, Chile is still an uninteresting and remote country. During his three years' stay as Secretary at the Chilean Embassy in Ottawa, the eminent poet, Dr. Humberto Diaz Casanueva, received virtually no invitations to lecture at university audiences in Canada although he had helped reform the educational systems of several countries and published numerous books. The same is true in regard to Cuba. That country was ably represented by His Excellency Dr. Mariano Brully Caballero, an equally fine poet, friend of Paul Valery, once very active in the Committee for Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations and to-day Cuban delegate to UNESCO. He made no impression whatsoever on our national life, excepting that his friends among government officials in the capital recall with the utmost pleasure his personality, his conversations, his parties.

Latterly, the Secretary of the Peruvian Embassy, Dr. Jose Alvarado Sanchez, has delivered a few lectures on Peruvian literature to private groups and at McGill University. A distinguished intellectual, he is studying our political life very closely, trying to learn what may benefit his own countrymen. He numbered among his friends Cesar Vallejo, a genius, one of those poets who like Francois Villon, or John Keats seem all fire and spiritual beauty. Their souls consume their vital energies, and they die before they have expressed the tumult of their thoughts. Vallejo was a Peruvian. The heir to his greatness was not a compatriot but a Venezuelan, Juan Liscano. Juan Liscano has always been a close friend of Dr. Jose Alvarado Sanchez and of Dr. Humberto Diaz Casanueva.

Juan Liscano lives in the world of ideas, feelings, aspirations, poetry. Personal ambition leaves him indifferent. Lyrics dedicated to his wife are exquisitely musical, deeply felt expressions of man's oneness with his kind, and his yearning for spiritual perfection. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Liscano feels that a good purpose does not justify evil means, and that honourable conduct more befits a man than acquiring wealth or political power.

Juan Liscano is Director of the Literary Supplement *El Nacional*, one of the leading dailies in Caracas. This supplement, under his direction, bears comparison with the literary Supplement of the London *Times*. Its columns are

open to writers professing every doctrine, and reflect the major philosophical conflicts of the age. Liscano believes his duty to be the study of these conflicts, their definition and peaceable resolution, for, in his mind, there exists no irreconcilable difference between peoples of distinct cultures.

Because certain mulatto families live as savages in the Venezuelan jungle, they are despised by the aristocracy to which Liscano belongs. Stirred by their plight, interested in their beliefs, he has studied their dances, their music, their superstitions and shown they differ only in colour from his mighty friends.

Under a Liberal administration, some years ago, he directed the Division of Folklore of the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture and undertook valuable research for the Library of Congress in Washington. An Army revolt overthrew the elected government, and Liscano's Liberal views exposed him to persecution. Nonetheless, he adhered to his defeated party, together with friends, helped found *El Nacional* as a journal not merely of protest, but for the elucidation of public problems and political doctrines.

The following paragraphs are fragments taken from his manuscripts now in the possession of the Library of Congress in Washington and the National Museum of Canada. They constitute an original and interesting study of the African element in the Venezuelan population, which he clearly distinguishes from the Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Colombian peoples. The Afro-Venezuelans are descended from negroes taken to Venezuela by the Spaniards, during the 18th century. Slaves were given their freedom in 1810, and this law was finally ratified in 1854. They had already won their rights as citizens, thanks to their participation in the War of Independence (from Spain), and because they were accepted as citizens, they did not preserve those voodoo rites familiar in Haiti. The latter, Liscano affirms, were an expression of the desire for racial survival. His own studies of the Afro-Venezuelans show how they adapted the famous Penitents Procession, still practised in Seville, and how the Penitents Procession was itself inspired by the rites of Osiris and Dionysius.

Folklore (Liscano writes) does not belong to the primitive but rather to a partially civilized man, because it is one with memory and belongs to that period of a culture in gestation, before people have acquired a tradition or entered into a period when reason guides all their acts, A people possess a folklore

when they begin to take stock of their surroundings, to remember to gaze deep into the vast nocturnal memory that is the soul born of the conjunction of human destiny and time. Folklore is neither an art nor a science, but a faculty people achieve when about their being are etched the spiritual shadows cast by experience and history. It is the faculty to relive the past, a gift earned through the anguish of years, of centuries when the ivy, the dust, the tempests of life, in short, when time has covered the soul with its obscure patina. Only in maturity is there memory when the meridian hour is reached, the equinox, the last equinox, old age, when philosophy contemplates the frost and rime.

In Venezuela, during torrid mid-June nights, the powerful beat of African drums rumbles through the hot central valleys, the music of military drums and timbrels through the state of Tuy, while dancing devils sway as in sacramental allegory before the village church.

On June fifth, in the early morning, the sound of chimes calls the faithful to take part in the Corpus Christi celebration at San Francisco de Yare. Eighty figures dressed in red, some wearing blue and white striped shirts, some wearing leaves of palm cross their shoulders press towards the door to take part in the procession. They wear on their faces monstrous masks of horn sewn to linen of the same color as the gown, which falls from their shoulders like a cloak and is caught at the waist with a rosary of white beads, a timbrel, on a rope or cord. They carry a maraca in one hand, and in the other a pliable cane, at the end of which is a handkerchief used either as a banner or for collecting money.

When the Host is raised these penitents begin to moan and dance till they fall to the ground. When the mass ends, the dance unfolds in all its vigour. A host of devils rises to its feet, stamps, gesticulates, before the threshold of the church, the penitents form two rows of men, kneeling and praying. Between these lines of prostrate bodies come, dancing, two devils, imposing lean. One raises his monstrous horned masks to the sun. These are the Master of Ceremonies and his Aide. Staggering, dancing to the double beat of the drums, these devils reach the very lintels of the church door, wait a moment, turn, dance, bow, mingle with the other devils. Two devils amongst those kneeling rise and repeat the same performance.

After this ceremony, the Master of Ceremonies and his Aide lead all the devils back to the village, dancing to the double beat of the drums before the Image of the Heart of Jesus, while the church bells ring noon and signal the forming of the Corpus Christi procession. Harkening to the sound, the devils assume attitudes either of weariness or reflection, dance frantically as the priest leaves the church.

At the head of the devils' procession walks one, lashing a whip to right and left, flogging the penitents who never turn their back on their tormentors, or on the Holy Vessel. Devils and procession make their way through the village, and return to the

church. When the priest returns the Holy Vessel to the altar, the devils break into unearthly howls as though the Light of the World had suddenly become extinguished. They try to hurl themselves within the sacred precincts. The door of the church becomes their Wailing Wall. Their movements become frenzied, and cries desperate. Evening shadows close around the demoniac crowd and their howls become terrified as the priest closes the altar on the mystery of Christ.

The devils then undertake a pilgrimage, dancing, leave the village and on the outskirts erect three crosses, which they adorn with flowers. Their road to Calvary is strewn with the trunks of trees, fresh cut, stuck into the earth, points up. They run the gauntlet of these spikes, and as they go, uproot the trees and hurl them into the air—vestige of some ancient spring fertility rite. They reunite before the Master of Ceremonies, form two columns, face each other. Side by side, sit the Master of Ceremonies and his Aide. Like hierarchs these two sit immovable, while a dance in obeisance to them is resumed. This dance doubtless perpetuates some ancient ceremony attendant on the initiation of newly arrived negro slaves among the established slaves on plantations . . .

Studying these rites, these religions, we appreciate the common origin of man, his brotherhood with his kind, despite superficial cultural differences, his identity of being with the ordered harmony of the stars' serene courses, and the rhythm of changing seasons, whose many moods express all the ardent emotions and marvellous range of human temperament.

From this brief description of the primitive folk dances of a remote state of Venezuela, we should not conclude that Venezuela is another Georgia or another Libya. Interest in primitive peoples and their betterment has been the rallying cry of the intellectuals in Latin America since the First World War. Readers are already aware that the famous Mexican painters, Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, David Siqueiros, all chose Indian themes, that the present Mexican Director of UNESCO, Jaime Torres Bodet, was then writing poems about the ancient Indian civilizations of Mexico as was the Chilean Nobel prize winner and poet, Gabriela Mistral. They expressed the ideals of a political movement that has since flourished, settled and become incorporated into laws, schools, respect for the cultural heritage bequeathed to Mexico by the Mayas, the Aztecs, the Toltecs, the Mixtecs and many other native peoples, to Peru by the Quechuas, to Venezuela by her own "Indians". Juan Liscano, in showing the similarity between the Penitents' Dance of Seville, and the Negro Penitents' Dance in Tux State, intended to awaken interest in a

savage tribe and to show how little men differ, regardless of the fact that some wear the purple robes of the Inquisitor and others the brand of the slave.

It will be seen from this brief sketch how the Latin American newspaper editor differs from his Canadian counterpart; but the ideals animating Juan Liscano and John W. Dafoe were not, after all, so very different, and although the latter preferred plain speech and the former writes verse, both devoted their lives and sacrificed their interests to clarifying public issues, in what they considered the best interests of their people and of justice.

By a strange coincidence, as I conclude this most inadequate article, I received a letter from Mr. Liscano, who regularly publishes in his journal my own studies on Canadian arts and letters. He informed me that *El Nacional* was being temporarily closed by order of the Military Government, and he added these words, which I hope he will not mind my having transcribed for the benefit of all Canadians interested in his country and in its culture:

I have not been able to write poetry for a year and a half. I have sought refuge from so many pressing social and political problems in the pursuit of pure scientific study and devoted myself more and more to the study of the folklore of my country, and the preparation of a series of essays to be published shortly by Editorial Avila Grafico.

Ah, we Latin-Americans suffer a great deal in consequence of that Hispanic Mediterranean genius, in a manner in which your countries of the North seem not in the least to be troubled, for with the creative vehemence of temperament we also have inherited an utter inability to consolidate our great dreams of humanism in terms of concrete social and political gains. Like Spain, our countries lose all their energy in their struggle against the most reactionary feudalism. The poet's concept of black and white Sapin warring together in one soul, this is not a poet's concept but the truth for we pass from a moment of bright liberty to the most violent and tyrannical despotism. You Saxons produce no Don Quixote, no Sister Juana de la Cruz, indeed but within a moderate and reasonable frame of collective existence evolve certain basic conditions of social and political stability and justice that seem to us impossible to attain. Is it our curse that we must be blessed with a marvelous genius we can never transform into reality?

Are we doomed to create such a magnificent individual as Don Quixote and live under General Franco? Our South American countries struggled to free themselves from the yoke of Spain because they dreamed with the French philosophers, and they sank unto a despotism blacker than that from which they had

emerged. You Anglo-Saxons cannot create a Don Quixote, as a man or as a dream, but on the other hand, we cannot create so stable a political life as yours with its elasticity its respect for the individual and its possibility of reform.

Later in the letter Liscano refers to that very fine essay by His Excellency Salvador da Madariago, former Ambassador of the Spanish Republic to the League of Nations, which in part says:

The Spaniard's norm is honor and the subject of his interest not things, but Man. Man is the main, if not the only, subject of his literature. No other nation can show such a strong tendency towards the creation of concrete types of human beings. Observe how all through Spanish art, definite types, on canvas, in the novel, or in drama, stand out in such relief that in contrast the background of nature and circumstance sinks into insignificance . . . The dominant feature of Spanish art is not that it is conceived from an artistic but from a vital point of view. The Spanish artist makes art the raw material of life, not life the raw material of art.

Juan Liscano came into office under the presidency of Romulo Gallegos, one of the finest contemporary novelists, now in exile, overthrown by a Military Junta. The poet has tried to use freedom of the press to better the condition of his people and create an elastic social system, as is our own, responsive to the needs of all the community. This has not been possible. Will he now cease to be an individual and become the personification of an idea, persecuted because he holds certain views? A new and unhappy page has opened in the chapter of his life and perhaps in the history of his country.