

## XX

### RODÓ

A FEW months ago José Enrique Rodó died in Palermo on his way from South America to France.<sup>1</sup> This statement probably conveys no meaning, and it may even be that it is here made for the first time in England. We live, still with a certain degree of safety, in a remote island wrapped round by northern mists which deaden all the rumours of the world, and its finer voices only penetrate to us, if at all, from afar, slowly and with difficulty. South America we associate with various miscellaneous things, perhaps mostly unpleasant. We seldom think of it—even if we happen to have been there—as a land of poets and artists and critics. So it can scarcely be surprising that few among us know so much as the name of South America's best writer, who was also the best writer anywhere in the Castilian speech, and one of the most distinguished spirits of our time.

Our ignorance may seem the more ungracious if we learn that Rodó's most remarkable essay—his whole work may be said to be comprehended in some half-dozen long essays—is called *Ariel*.<sup>2</sup> This sensitive and exalted

<sup>1</sup> This was written in the autumn of 1917.

<sup>2</sup> José Enrique Rodó: *Cinco Ensayos*. Madrid, 1915.

thinker, familiar with the finest culture of Europe, found the symbol of his aspirations for the world in the English poet's *Tempest*. *Ariel* is the long monologue (extending to a hundred pages) of a teacher who once more gathers his old disciples around him in his study, dominated by a bronze statue of the Shakespearian spirit of the air at the moment when Prospero gives him his freedom. "Ariel symbolises the rule of reason and of feeling, generous enthusiasm, high and disinterested motives for action, the spirituality of culture, the vivacity and grace of intelligence, the ideal goal to which human selection tends, eliminating with the patient chisel of life the tenacious vestiges of Caliban, symbol of sensuality and torpor."

Prospero—for so his disciples have named him—discourses on the art of living. For Rodó believed with Shaftesbury that "virtue is a kind of art, a divine art," and the moral law "an æsthetics of conduct." To live in the finest sense is to exercise a free creative activity which passes beyond interested and material ends, to cultivate the leisure of the interior life, and from that centre to organise the beauty and harmony of society. To enforce this point of view, Rodó analyses at length, beneath the mask of Prospero, the spirit of the civilisation of the United States. He refrains from insinuating—such a suggestion would be alien to his gracious and sympathetic attitude—that this spirit is symbolised by Caliban. He admires, though he is unable to love or altogether to approve, the spirit of North America, and his penetrating analysis never even remotely verges on harshness or scorn. He distinctly believes, however,

that the utilitarian conception of human destiny and equality in mediocrity as the social rule constitute in their intimate combination the spirit of Americanism. If it can be said that Utilitarianism is the Word of the English spirit, then the United States is the Word made flesh. Rodó by no means implies that the same spirit may not be found also in South America. On the contrary, he declares that there is in the South an increasing Nordomania, but he regards it as opposed to the genius of Latin America, a mere artificial "snobisme" in the political sphere. It is necessary, even for the sake of America as a whole, that Latin America should jealously guard the original character of its collective personality, for nearly all luminous and fruitful epochs of history have been, as in Greece with the poles of Athens and Sparta, the result of two distinct correlated forces; the preservation of the original duality of America, while maintaining a genial and emulatory difference, at the same time favours concord and solidarity.

"In the beginning was action." In those words which Goethe set at the outset of *Faust*, Rodó remarks, the historian might begin the history of the North American Republic. Its genius is that of force in movement. Will is the chisel which has carved this people out of hard stone and given it a character of originality and daring. It possesses an insatiable aspiration to cultivate all human activities, to model the torso of an athlete for the heart of a freeman. The indiscriminating efforts of its virile energy, even in the material sphere, are saved from vulgarity by a certain epic grandeur.

Yet, asks Rodó, can this powerful nation be said to be realising, even tending to realise, the legitimate demands, moral, intellectual, and spiritual, of our civilisation? Is this feverish restlessness, centupling the movement and intensity of life, expended on objects that are truly worth while? Can we find in this land even an approximate image of the perfect city?

North American life seems, indeed, to Rodó, to proceed in that vicious circle which Pascal described as the course of the pursuit of well-being which has no end outside itself. Its titanic energy of material aggrandisement produces a singular impression of insufficiency and vacuity. This people has not known how to replace the inspiring idealism of the past by a high and disinterested conception of the future, and so lives only in the immediate reality of the present. The genial positivism of England, it seemed to Rodó, has here been deprived of that idealism which was a deep source of sensibility beneath the rough utilitarian surface of the English spirit, ready to gush forth in a limpid stream when the art of a Moses struck the rock. English aristocratic institutions, however politically unjust and out of date, set up a bulwark to vulgar mercantilism which the American Republic removed, but left unreplaced. So it is that we find in the United States a radical inaptitude for selection, a general disorder of the ideal faculties, a total failure to realise the supreme spiritual importance of leisure. They have attained the satisfaction of their vanity of material magnificence, but they have not acquired the tone of fine taste. They pronounce with solemn and emphatic

accent the word "art," but they have not been able to conceive that divine activity, for their febrile sensationism excludes its noble serenity. Neither the idealism of beauty nor the idealism of truth arouses their passion, and their war against ignorance results in a general semi-culture combined with languor of high culture. Nature has not granted them the genius for propaganda by beauty or for apostolic vocation by the attraction of love. Bartholdi's statue of Liberty over New York awakens no such emotion of religious veneration as the ancient traveller felt when he saw emerge from the diaphanous nights of Attika the gleam of Athene's golden spear on the height of the Acropolis.

Just as in the main this analysis may be, it will occur to some readers that Rodó has perhaps attributed too fixed a character to North American civilisation, and has hardly taken into adequate account those germs of recent expansion which may well bring the future development of the United States nearer to his ideals. It must be admitted, indeed, that if he had lived a few months longer Rodó might have seen confirmation in the swift thoroughness, even exceeding that of England, with which the United States on entering the war sought to suppress that toleration for freedom of thought and speech which he counted so precious, shouting with characteristic energy the battle-cry of all the belligerents, "Hush! don't think, only feel and act!" with a pathetic faith that the affectation of external uniformity means inward cohesion—a method of "self-inflicted camouflage," as Professor Dewey has termed it in a discussion of the

"Conscription of Thought" which Rodó might have inspired. Still, Rodó himself recognised that, even as already manifested, the work of the United States is not entirely lost for what he would call "the interests of the soul." It has been said that the mercantilism of the Italian Republics paid the expenses of the Renaissance, that the spices and ivory of Lorenzo de' Medici renewed the Symposia of Plato. There is in civilisation a transformation of force, by which the material becomes the spiritual, and provided that process is carried through, it seemed to Rodó, the North American Republic will escape the fate of Nineveh and Sidon and Carthage. Ariel is for Rodó the ultimate outcome of that process, the instinct of perfectibility, the ascension of the organised forms of Nature into the flaming sphere of spirit.

It will be seen that, alike in his criticism of life and his criteria of progress, Rodó remains essentially democratic. He is altogether out of sympathy with the anti-democratic conception of life often associated with Nietzsche's doctrine of the Super-man. He waived politely aside the affirmation of Bourget that the triumph of democracy would mean the defeat of civilisation, and greatly as he admired the genius of Renan, he refused to believe that a concern for ideal interests is opposed to the democratic spirit; such belief, indeed, would be the condemnation of Latin America as much as of Anglo-Saxon America. Rodó accepts democracy, but on that basis he insists on the need for selection. Even in Nature, he remarks, among flowers and insects and birds and onwards, we see natural selection favouring superiority and ensuring the

triumph of beauty. It is not the destruction but the education of democracy which is needed in order to further this process of natural selection. Rodó held that it is the duty of the State to render possible the uniform revelation of human superiorities, wherever they exist. "Democratic equality is the most efficacious instrument of spiritual selection." Democracy alone can conciliate equality at the outset with an inequality at the end which gives full scope for the best and most apt to work towards the good of the whole. So considered, democracy becomes a struggle, not to reduce all to the lowest common level, but to raise all towards the highest degree of possible culture. Democracy in this sense retains within itself an imprescriptible element of aristocracy, which lies in establishing the superiority of the best with the consent of all; but on this basis it becomes essential that the qualities regarded as superior are really the best, and not merely qualities immobilised in a special class or caste and protected by special privileges. The only aristocracy possible on a democratic basis is one of morality and culture. Superiority in the hierarchical order must be superiority in the capacity to love. That truth, Rodó declares, will remain rooted in human belief "so long as it is possible to arrange two pieces of wood in the form of a cross."

In *Ariel* Rodó never directly brings South America on to the scene. He would gladly, one divines, claim for his own continent the privilege of representing Ariel. But he realised that much remained to do before that became possible. His love for his own country is embodied

in three of his finest and latest essays, concerned with the three noblest figures of South America in different fields. In the first of these he deals with the greatest figure of South America in the sphere of actions, Bolivar, "the South American Napoleon." In the second he discusses attractively the life and environment of Juan Montalvo, the greatest prose-writer of South America, with whose name Rodó's is now associated. In the third he shows all his delicate critical discrimination in estimating the work of Ruben Dario, who was, as Rodó points out, not so much the greatest poet of South America as of contemporary Spain, an imaginative figure of world-wide interest. In these essays Rodó is revealed as the unfailingly calm and lucid critic, discriminating and sympathetic, possessed of a style which, with its peculiar personal impress of combined gravity and grace, rendered him, in the opinions of good Spanish judges, the greatest contemporary master of the Castilian tongue.

That Rodó realised how far the finer spirits of South America yet are from completely moulding their own land to their ideals we may gather from various episodes of his work. He was not able to regard South America, any more than North America, as to-day a congenial soil for art. If he disliked the intolerant spirit of utilitarian materialism in the North, he equally opposed the intolerance of Jacobinism in the South. This is brought out in an admirable series of letters, entitled "Liberalismo y Jacobinismo," suggested by the action of the Charity Commissioners in removing all images of the Crucified Christ from the walls of hospitals, suppressing them, not

as objects of worship (for that had already been done), but even as symbols. Rodó criticises this action, not from the point of view of Christianity which is not his, but from that of a sympathetic and tolerant Liberalism, to which he opposes the spirit of Jacobinism. By Jacobinism he means, in fair agreement with Taine, a mental attitude of absolute dogmatism, necessarily implying intolerance, on the basis of rationalistic free-thought. Flaubert's Homais is its immortal embodiment. Rodó admirably analyses this attitude, and shows how, with all its clear logical thoroughness, it is out of touch with the complexities of life and lacks the sense for human realities. Rodó sees that true free-thought, far from being a mere rigid formula, is the result of an interior education which few can acquire. The attainment of toleration, of spiritual toleration, he regards as the great task of the past century—an affirmative and active toleration, "the great school of largeness in thought, of delicacy in sensibility, of perfectibility in character." He foresaw, even before the War, that there are troublous times ahead for freedom, but he saw, also, that even if but one soul should stand firm, there will be the palladium of human liberty.

Rodó was of the tribe of Quinet and Renan, of Fouillée and especially Guyau. Like those fine spirits, he desired to be the messenger of sweetness and of light, of the spirit of Jesus combined with the spirit of Athens, and the intolerance of rationalism seemed to him as deadly a poison to civilisation as that of Christianity. In his steady devotion to this combined ideal Rodó may be said

to be European, and more distinctively French. But in his adaptation of that ideal to the needs of his own land, and his firm establishment of it on a democratic basis, he is the representative of South America. It was his final hope that out of the agony of this war there would emerge new ideals of life, new aspirations of art, in which Latin America, stirred by the worldwide shock, would definitely affirm its own conscious personality.

Rodó was a Uruguayan, of old and wealthy family, born forty-five years ago in Montevideo, where he spent nearly the whole of his life. On leaving the University of his native city, where in later years he himself lectured on Literature, his activities found some scope in journalism, and he was interested in politics, being at one time a Deputy in the Uruguayan Chamber. The mood of his earliest writings is one of doubt, anxiety, scepticism; he seems to be in expectation of some external revelation or revolution. But his own personal vision became gradually established. His revelation was not from without, but from within. He attained a rare serenity and lucidity; and he remained always indifferent to applause. Indeed, amid the declamatory and impulsive extravagance which often marks the South American, it seemed to some that his attitude was the outcome of a temperament almost too calm and reasonable, and they recalled that neither in youth or later had he ever been known to be in love. But Rodó's spirit was as large-hearted and sympathetic as it was penetrative and keen. When he died, in Sicily, suddenly and alone, on his way at last to visit the land of France which he regarded as

his intellectual home, he was exercising, it is said, a tranquil kind of spiritual royalty over the whole South American Continent. Henceforth his slender and very tall figure will no longer be seen striding rapidly through the streets of his native city, as his friend and fellow-countryman Barbagelata has described it, one arm swinging like an oar, and lifted aquiline face that recalled a condor of the Andes.