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INTRODUCTION TO ANTONIO CASO'S "THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSAL HISTORY"

Antonio Caso's *The Concept of Universal History*, a selection from which follows this introduction, was first published in 1923 and is representative of Mexican philosophy in its Golden Age and of Caso's mature thought. Eduardo García Máynez, who belongs to the generation whose members were taught by Caso, remarks that for the period between the two World Wars Caso was "the spiritual leader of Mexican youth." According to García Máynez, "when we were young we found in him not only a master who gave us his wisdom generously, but a philosopher whose life equalled his thought and who made of his conduct a living paradigm of morality."[1] Caso, then, was an integral thinker, as the great philosophers in the Hispanic tradition, such as the Argentinian Alejandro Korn, the Uruguayan Carlos Vaz Ferreira, and the Spaniard Miguel de Unamuno, have striven and often have succeeded to be. Alfonso Reyes notes that Caso's vast knowledge of philosophical ideas and the logical strength with which he expressed and organized that knowledge made his university teaching "the pride of our academic world."

Caso is representative in the sense in which Ralph Waldo Emerson used the term "representative man;" he is the best and most complete expression of a form of life: the *pensador* of the Revolutionary era. *The Concept of Universal History* reads more like a lecture than a philosophical treatise, a stylistic characteristic which marked Mexican philosophy of the Golden Age. Caso and his great colleague José Vasconcelos did not, in accord with the integral tendency of their projects, separate education from investigation. Caso, in particular, was known to be a brilliant lecturer, who in his courses on the history of philosophy would enter into the formative intuition of each system successively and make old doctrines come alive as though they were being expressed by those who first enunciated them. He exemplified in practice, then, the "universal sympathy" and "intellectual love" which he defends in *The Concept of Universal History*. This work itself shows evidence of that sympathy. The first part of it presents with vigor and passion the case for history's inferiority to the sciences, but then the argument is abruptly reversed and the claims of history to autonomy and dignity are even more powerfully defended. The ultimate aim of the work is to put each form of spiritual activity in its proper place and within the bounds fixed for it by rational reflection. Even philosophy must function within the limits set by intuition, a requirement which makes Caso's critical project similar to Kant's task of providing for the self-limitation of reason.

Reyes says, the "new truths" of European and North American thought to the Mexican intellectual world. These "new truths" were primarily those contained in the vitalistic revolt against idealism and positivism, particularly

as expressed by Henri Bergson and William James. But as the selection to follow shows clearly, Arthur Schopenhauer's voluntarism and the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle were also essential to Mexican philosophy in its Golden Age.

Caso's existential ontology is nowhere more evident than in *The Concept of Universal History*. Making his contribution to the debate, which is still lively in our own time, over the proper definitions of and relations among the various forms of inquiry, Caso defends the autonomy of both philosophy and history from the natural sciences and from one another. The essence of the defense is that philosophy and history touch aspects of Being which cannot be conceptualized, but can only be grasped by intuition. The sciences live within a conceptual medium, midway between the philosophical intuition of ineffable first principles and the historical intuition of irreducible concrete and unique individuals. The concepts of natural science are abstractions which allow us to manipulate things around us with relative success, but do not give us contact with reality. The intuitions grounding philosophy and history are diverse, leading Caso to a dualism which is only resolved in the deeds of the living person. Philosophy's intuition is ultimately mystical and yields a pervasive Being which is too elusive and omnipresent to be grasped by concepts, whereas history's intuition is ultimately aesthetic and yields an utterly unique individual which is too rich to be exhausted by concepts. Both the ineffable and the irreducible, then, are too great to be conceptualized, but in different ways: The first is too pervasive and the second too distinctive. Caso installs science and the arts squarely between the ineffable and the individual, as the two middle corners of a diamond. History, at the bottom corner, touches particularity and then alludes to it in its descriptions; philosophy, at the top corner, touches universality and evokes it in its argumentation. From history's viewpoint everything, including physical entities, is historical, because for it reality is concrete individuality. Hence, Caso's Universal History is universal in the strictest sense.

Caso's dualism is symbolized by his striking use of Mexican national imagery in which philosophy is depicted as the eagle and history as the serpent. The eagle soars above the land, gaining some freedom from the spirit of gravity, but failing to discern the complexity of individual beings. The serpent crawls along the ground, in intimate contact with each particular, but unable to unite them all into a totality. This is the ontological analogue of Caso's famous moral formula of *alas y plomo* (wings and lead), which signified that the virtuous individual should combine the wings of idealism with the lead of prudent realism. With regard to ontology, the complete thinker must intuit both universality and particularity through diverse acts of spirit, and have the equanimity of mind neither to reduce one to the other, nor to reduce either to scientific or logical concepts. Integral thought is not won by dialectical ingenuity but by remaining in constant contact with all of the limits

of life while holding fast to life's immediate integrity, or as Caso puts it, "unicity."

Caso's insistence on the concreteness, uniqueness, and inexhaustibility of the individual being informs later Mexican philosophy, particularly that of Leopoldo Zea and Emilio Uranga, both of whom associate the revolt against cultural imperialism with the defense of individuality. Unfortunately the extent of Caso's contribution is not often acknowledged, perhaps because in his youth he did not break completely with Porfirian politics and in his later years he turned towards a Kierkegaardian defense of faith. In *The Concept of Universal History* we find him at the height of his powers, teacher and philosopher in one, expositor and originator simultaneously — and most of all a capacious mind and a generous spirit.

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Notes

1. Eduardo Garcia Maynez, "Prologo," in García Máynez (ed.), *Antonio Caso: Breve Antología* México: Secretaria de Educación Pública, 1945, vi.