Miguel Ángel Asturias. (Archivo de Marco Vinicio Mejía)

A dream of waters glittering with stars

Un sueño de aguas resplandecientes con estrellas

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Abstract

Revista Análisis de la Realidad Nacional publishes what is perhaps the only text that Miguel Ángel Asturias wrote in English, entitled «A dream of shining waters with stars». The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization included it in the book entitled Impact of science on society, published in France in 1969.

Keywords:
Science, Education, Culture, Miguel Ángel Asturias.

Resumen

La Revista Análisis de la Realidad Nacional publica el que tal vez sea el único texto que Miguel Ángel Asturias escribió en inglés, titulado «Un sueño de aguas brillantes con estrellas». La Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura lo incluyó en el libro titulado El impacto de la ciencia en la sociedad, publicado en Francia en 1969.

Palabras clave:
Ciencia, Educación, Cultura, Miguel Ángel Asturias.

In our day science and literature seem so far removed, so widely separated from one another that a poet or writer like myself looks with timid respect on everything relating to science, scarcely daring to inquire into, to glance at, the awesome discoveries of the scientists. There are those who speak, not unjustifiably, of a veritable schism in what is called Western culture, a schism which, at its most extreme, leads not a few men of letters and artists to ignore and despise the scientists and the technicians.

A Spanish lecturer on Spanish and Spanish-American literature in a German university recently called to see me. He is a specialist not only in languages, but in theology and the origin and development of religions, and as such he searched in my books for any references to the primitive religion and the original beliefs of the ancient Mayas. Suddenly he said to me:

'Do you know what science can make of your books?' and answered himself by saying, 'Nothing! In Germany we have fed your texts into computers, as we do with other writers, to break them down and analyse them, but your work cannot be examined like that; even so highly technical a scientific process is unable to locate and isolate elements which might be overlooked in a normal analysis made by a class in literature or grammar. There is something in your legends, poems and novels which is alien to our knowledge and our science.'

"But', I asked him, 'is science involved her—isn't it something completely different?' 'There would seem', said the lecturer, 'to be an area—let us call it a no- man's-land—where science and literature meet; thus, scientific methods applied to your texts can extract sociological, psychological, historical and demographic elements which belong more to science than to art.'

I was much stirred. In a technological civilization, where the writer is constantly diminishing in the esteem of the rising generations, attracted, polarized and magnetized by the wonders of technology and scientific research, this unfolding—when we're having a total negation of man—of new vistas of the possibilities for a more human culture, suggested to me that science is not as it is depicted by those whose make its cult out to be a mystery and a ceremony intended exclusively for the initiated.

So I sought out the friendship of scientists and the company of mathematician—those of the numerous higher mathematics—of laboratory workers and naturalists. By consorting with them I was enriched, not because I became more deeply versed in their science—lacking the proper grounding, I could never be more than a neophyte—but by all that I learned that enabled me to write verse and prose, poems and novels on energy, living matter, motion and mechanics, adapting myself to a new form of beauty and emotion.

And I was further enriched by the lesson of the scientists' faith in their investigations and their conviction that they are always working for the benefit of all. They strengthened my contention that literature must be at the service of mankind. What many consider to be the bondage of literature, when it takes up nonliterary concerns, faithfully reflects the scientists who work in their laboratories on behalf of life, who by their calculations disintegrate man as an individual and egoistic being and reintegrate him with the cosmos.

It is on this common ground of interest in, and anxiety over, the condition of man that we writers can encounter the scientists and come to an understanding, wiping out once and for all the causes of misunderstunding, which, however numerous they may be, are not so many that they cannot be successfully overcome in the interests of a cultural unity which would make us better armed to face today's extremely grave problems.

Science should not, then, be foreign to us, but should enrich with its experience the non-scientists, who, too, are concerned with the future of the world; on the other hand, humanistic culture should help to

Fuente: El Faro de Vigo

restrain those research workers—unfortunately far from rare—who are at the service of war, seeking them out in their fastnesses, discussing with them and forcing them to realize the bad that they are doing, the crime they commit.

What cannot, what must not go on, is this division between the two camps, between science and humanistic culture. To leave the scientists to themselves, not to urge them to lift their eyes from their studies and research and see what is happening around them, is to refuse mankind today, so in need of the help which science and technology can assuredly offer, the possibility of at least glimpsing an escape from the dilemma in which it seems to be caught between war and over-population.

Similarly, to let the creators of fiction and fantasy, writers, humanists and artists remain isolated, is to reduce their vision, to destroy within them their creative curiosity and turn them into dunces who think that their own learning is everything, whereas it is nothing—for such learning is impoverished because it is out of date. They fall increasingly behind by conforming to a traditionalistic culture appropriate to those pejoratively called 'intellectuals'.

The most responsible scientists are not hostile to such an encounter—or re-encounter, if you like—between scientists and non-scientists, technicians and intellectuals, because of the vistas it would open for the near future; by arousing the interest of each side in the other's work, it would be possible to bridge the present division in our culture, which is unfortunately everwidening.

From another point of view, no less significant and important, such a re-encounter of scientists, intellectuals and technicians would offer a brighter prospect for the settlement of the problems of the Third World.

In the particular case of Latin America, contempt for science and technology and the exaggerated value set on the humanities and scholastic learning have dragged us down to the bottom of the ladder as regards progress based on technology and science; we are, therefore, left in the hands of improvisers who, far from settling problems, make them even more serious. We must progress, not at the snail's pace of past centuries, but at today's 'full speed' ahead, and this can be done only through application of the discoveries of modern science.

We in Latin America and in all the Third World must shake ourselves free of the traditional notions of outdated cultures and cast our eyes upon this wonderful boundless universe of science. With the continual expansion or scientific and technical cadres, we must apply methods, not for the benefit of the few, but of the vast populations that, because of inadequate agricultural methods and appalling living conditions, suffer from hunger in the midst of a fabulously wealthy nature.

Deplorably, it is being asked whether the future of our countries must not be forged in our Latin American universities and centres of study by pressing the students into political action, violence and permanent revolution. But this is to be oblivious of the fact that the true revolution in our world, sealed off from tomorow, is the scientific revolution that can free these students from time-worn shibboleths; devoting themselves instead to the study of the sciences and their applications, they could change overnight—I repeat, overnight—the destiny of our countries, at present condemned to play the inferior role of poor relations.

To do so we must open our minds and turn to scientifically more advanced countries for aid in the form of technicians and laboratories, educational facilities and accelerated training for our future scientists and practitioners in the handling of that vast world of highly complicated apparatus. I know that this is, unfortunately, not easy, because our universities would have to break with traditions which maintain them as conservers of antiquities and transform themselves into centres where technology would come first and such faculties as those of agronomy and veterinary science would cease to be disdained. We need more engineers and fewer lawyers, more technicians and fewer doctors.

It is drawing to an end, that world untouched by today's technological revolution, that earth-bound universe to which we—poor wretches!—desperately cling at a time when we are on our way to the cosmos and beginning to tread the soil of the planets. It has already lost currency, that accumulation of worn-out ideas which is stifling us, like the larval skin of the dragonfly, from which, though ready, it fails, to emerge for lack of the strength to break through the abysmal coffer in which it blindly lies. Science alone can do this for us, a humane science, humanized by contacts and interrelationships between scientists. and non-scientific men of culture, between technicians and poets, dreamers and practical men.

The beneficent utilization of our riches, the reduction of death's dominion via all the diseases which decimate us, the rational feeding of miserable populations that have been physically almost wiped out, and improvements in agricultural practice and in the handicrafts which will become industries—these will no longer go on waiting for the morrow which never comes. Without science there is no morrow, without science we have no future.

Fuente: El Faro de Vigo, archivo de Marco Vinicio Mejía.

And science means machinery: the replacement of men by machines in the most arduous tasks and in those where a lifetime would not suffice to produce results—such machines as computers. Planning, saving time and sparing energy, fuel and money can be done with present knowledge, and not miraculously, but as the result of controllable action in a re-affirmation and rebirth of man.

Call to the past

Once upon a time, however, there was another science, I tell myself and have been told. I hear whispers from the cities buried in the dense forests of my native Guatemala. 'And what became of that science?' I ask myself and I am asked. I helped to build those awe-inspiring cities. Architecture and astronomy. That science helped to transform the land, to produce food, to create the arts of sculpture and painting, music and poetry, all co-ordinated in a wonderful affirmation of man. What's become of that science? Did it disappear with those peoples in unprecedented catastrophes? Was it swallowed up by the ocean?

We are, I am, nostalgic for that science—which is why I am attracted by modern science, which fascinatingly connects with myths that promise the rebirth of our backward peoples. Backward but ready to move and to move forward, because those are paths already trod by their ancestors. It is the new onward march towards progress, towards the creative and redeeming flame, towards the rising sun...curiosity of millions of eyes riveted on screens in an urgent desire for knowledge, of eardrums eager for words and sounds which shape the messages of the diminutive transistors...secret talking of unreal things among people living in hope of, on the alert for, the return from the beyond of those flares of light which disappeared with their ancient science.

Prior to what cataclysms of water and fire did we possess all that now surrounds us? This technology was ours. We, the peoples of Central America, built pyramids, immense butterflies of stone which measured the path of the sun, we played a ball game as a training for making calculations, for poetry, song and the dance, and we inscribed our learning in glyphs which have not has yet been deciphered except for those of calendars—and these themselves are a source of wonder for the initiated when they realize that our calculation of the time of the Earth's revolution round the sun was scarcely different from the modern one.

Hence the religious dread with which a man from our part of the world contem- plates contemporary science in its vertiginous advance in all sectors of human activity, a dread that may be nothing more than a distant memory of the disasters once upon a time brought on by the same super-knowledge of man, at a time when the moon perhaps did not exist and it was the planet Venus which shed a marvellous light.

What are we, history or legend? Of what are we capable today? Very little, but tomorrow, if the internal springs of science reshape us, we shall be capable of every-thing. There are men waiting, men of ours, through whose veins runs a mysterious tincture of that which was one their science, and as such made for scientific and technological progress.

Suppositions? No, not suppositions, but facts. So it is told in the ancient books, pools into which flowed the rivers of oral tradition and in the pages of which we can read what was written and painted on fragments of bark. In them it is said, in veiled symbolic terms, that the day of the giants will come again, of the builders of cities, of those who made no use of the wheel except for toys, because they thought it a messenger of evil, of those who, in Peru, melted platinum for their ornaments. From the discoveries of the archaeologists we can form some idea of the level reached by those native scientists, though not at all of the techniques used by them, not only in casting metals, but in all fields of activity—dentistry, for example, since many of the skulls we possess in Copán exhibit teeth encrusted with jade and precious stones. All this, as the poet says, is a dream of waters glittering with stars.

The glyphs of tomorrow

Such, then, is our science, a dream of waters glittering with stars, a waiting for the dawn which will shine in full glory on our cities and regions. What we lack is technology, the manipulation of instruments, the new instruments. All the rest we have.

We will fashion the new glyphs with the tips of our fingers. The stelae covered with numbers will be replaced by the equally mysterious computers. The great scientific revolution will then arrive on a human scale. Give us the technical facilities and we shall discover our own science.

We do not reject magic, but in terms of science we regard it as an inoperative undercurrent. It was not with magic but with their knowledge that the Indians helped the Spanish conquistadors to build cathedrals and palaces, to decorate them with tropical beasts and plants expressed in drawings and lacework of stone. Those Indians not only built and decorated palaces and temples, but made ships, machinery to work the metals extracted from gold and silver mines, and dyes from trees and shellfish. And it is that ancestral lore which will help us to adapt ourselves rapidly, just as soon as we are given the means, to the progress of this decisive epoch.

Present-day science will enable us to industrialize, to improve our agriculture, utilize our sources of energy, just as we did when science was ours in bygone centuries. And for that reason, what was previously a request has now become an imperative: we need technological training, help to acquire knowledge, and then the capital to exploit our natural riches.

In this way we shall be able, by offering adequate conditions and remuneration, to keep our 'brains' who today emigrate and yield their fruits to the major industrial countries, their universities and technological centres.

Hope is everything, and for us science is just that: a hope, the possibility of a human revolution in the Third World.