

The book and universal culture

In the beginning, say the ancient scriptures, was the word, the verb. Man created alphabets. The alphabet has rooted the sound of the word in a symbol: the letter. Our alphabet comes from the Rome of 650 A.D. When the Columns of Hercules collapsed, signalling the end of the ancient world, the phrase *non plus ultra* (nothing over there) was used. Spain minted a coin called the *columnaria*, which pictured the two columns,

removed the negative and left *plus ultra* (beyond). Latin is that concrete.

When Columbus came to the Caribbean, the Spanish language was heard for the first time when Rodrigo de Triana yelled "*tierra*" and immediately absorbed the Caribbean word *cano* (canoe). Syncretism began as the mixture of languages.

The classic Greek tragedies arrived in the New World, among them the works of Aeschylus. Prometheus stole

the fire of intelligence, the fire of immortality. "Why have you given fire to men, since they are beings for only a day?," the Oceanides asked Prometheus when he was chained to a rock. Prometheus answered: "Because of my love for them, I gave them numbers, eminent science and also 'the way of arranging letters'."

Thus, the birth of writing is described. The first part of this work refers to the theft of the gods' fire. In the second part Prometheus is chained because of the theft. The third part of the trilogy, *Prometheus Liberated*, is lost forever. This makes the tragedy more dramatic.

We study classical Greek thought in books such as Plato's dialogues and the works of Aristotle, which are part of our European cultural heritage. This is the great influence of



Civilization and culture

What made Athens create our civilization? What led Athens to create art and literature, tragedy, philosophy, science and democracy in such a short period of time? The clash of cultures. This collision makes people realize that their behavior and customs are not "natural," that they are not the only ones possible, neither decreed by the gods nor inherent in human nature.

Before the works of Homer existed in written form there were books, but they were not popular and were not freely distributed on the market. What books existed were a great rarity and were not copied or commercially distributed. Instead they were kept in a sacred place under the care of priests.

Homer became not only the bible (*biblion*) of Athens but the first instrument of education, the first ABC, the first spelling book, the first novel. And it made the Athenians enlightened people.

Our civilization really is based on books: the sense of tradition and originality, seriousness and the sense of intellectual responsibility, the unprecedented power of the imagination and creativity, the concept of freedom and the characteristic urge to preserve it—all this is based on our love of books.

Karl Popper.

books through time. It is a voice that speaks to us as we read, bringing to life ancient voices; it is the greatest inheritance of mankind.

The European *plus ultra* is found in the great indigenous societies of America. The *Popol Vuh* tells the story of man's creation: when man did not exist, the world was cold, empty, quiet; it lived in silence. When the gods made man, words joined thought and were heard for the first time. What came first, according to this admirable book, was the word which was capable of expressing thought.

"Why did you give mortal men the knowledge of fire, immortality stolen from the gods?", the Oceanides asked Prometheus. "For the love of men; because they were wretched without knowing and listened without understanding, I gave them the light of intelligence." "How dare you, they being mortals?", the Oceanides persisted. Prometheus answered, "I took away their fear of death and implanted in their hearts blind hope."

This comes to us from distant centuries. Thanks to books we may hear Prometheus and Aristotle, learn about pure and impure forms of government, and hear Polybius, who united the pure forms in order to accomplish the balance of power.

Today we speak of human rights. One of the most important is the inviolability of the home. Let us see how this is formulated in the *fuero* (municipal charter) of Sobrarbe, Spain: "I am the king, when I am in my home."

Aragon had no hereditary monarchy; instead, the king was elected. The men would meet and proclaim: "We, who are worth as much as you and together more than you, make you king under the laws of Aragon." An indispensable balance to all government, this comes to us with the culture preserved in ancient texts.

In Mexico, on one of the sides of Xochicalco's truncated pyramid there is a glyphic description of an astronomers' convention held during the pre-Hispanic epoch. It was attended by Maya, Mixtecs, Zapotecs, Toltecs and tribes from the Gulf area.

When they met, they were concerned with about how to count the years. After studying the problem they made the necessary corrections to the calendar. In one of the reliefs, a hand holds back an incorrect date that had come forward too soon. The other hand is taking another date and placing it over the previous one, in order to obtain the correct date.

This occurred in the year 650, whereas the Gregorian correction

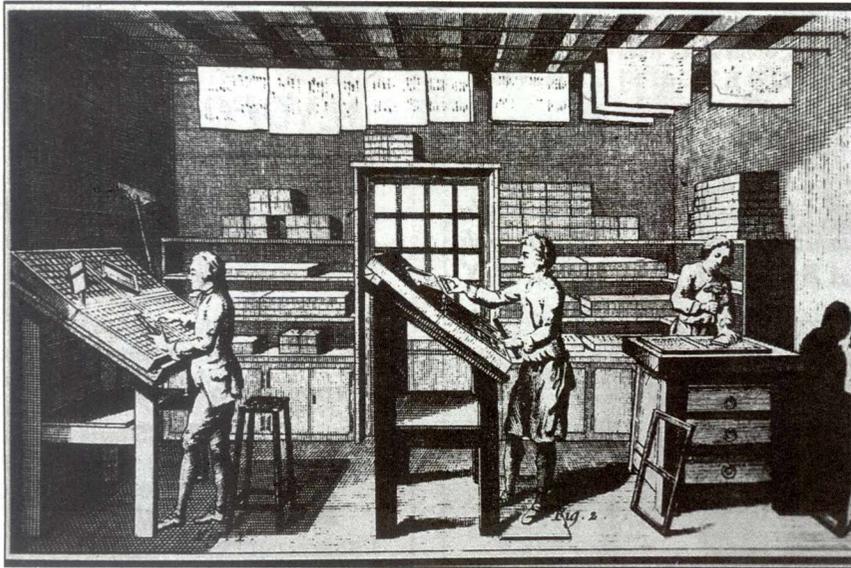
took place in Europe in 1582, more than nine centuries after the correction at Xochicalco.

Our ancestors also created the *nemoteni* days—non-existent days similar to our current leap years. The remarkable advancement of pre-Hispanic Mexico is clear.

The Maya came up with the concept of zero, an abstraction which is difficult to achieve; they also conceived of negative numbers. This goes together with other Mesoamerican accomplishments such as the architecture of Tenochtitlan, unique in its beauty, which the Spaniards viewed with astonishment.

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún translated the Náhuatl language using the Roman alphabet, in place of ideograms or hieroglyphics. He wrote the *Historia general de la Nueva España* (General History of New Spain) after listening to "informants," the old witnesses of the past, who related the life the indigenous peoples had before the Spaniards' arrival. Sahagún recorded these accounts in valuable texts.

Molina's *Vocabulario* is another fundamental text. Known erroneously as an "incunabulum" (a book printed from movable type before the 16th century), it was printed in 1575. (The true incunabula were printed in the 15th century, from Gutenberg until



The culture has been preserved through ancient texts.

1499.) From 1500 onward, each book indicated its birthplace: the place of its edition. The *Vocabulario* translated part of the Spanish language into Nahuatl and vice versa, becoming an indispensable tool for evangelization.

For reasons of petty self-interest, the Spanish colonists questioned whether Indians had souls. Charles V was consulted on this delicate topic, and he in turn passed the issue along to the Vatican. Pope Paul III gave his answer in the papal bull "Sublimis Deus" in 1537. This document states that both conquistadors and conquered are sons of God, therefore free and equal, and must be respected. They are compatible within the new laws.

Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, in his seven Treatises, distinguished himself for his defense of the Indians and succeeded in influencing legislation. The Sublimis Deus bull resounded throughout the world—there are no superior races—and proclaimed the basic equality of the human race.

The influence of the liberation movements' ideology throughout the world was a key antecedent to our independence. Texts by precursors to the French Revolution were read on the sly in New Spain, given that they were prohibited. They arrived in parts, hidden

between tobacco leaves, and when the loose pages of famous works were gathered together they were sometimes incomplete; the arrival of the next shipment was anxiously awaited.

Censorship was applied to the works of Montesquieu, Rousseau, Diderot, and others. The lesson is clear: prohibition is not possible in the world of ideas. No one can stop the winged voice from a book that "speaks into our ear," as Germán de Arciniegas said. A voice that speaks to us and inspires the desire for freedom.

Angel María Garibay was dedicated to investigating pre-Colonial philosophy, poetry and literature. Nezahualcóyotl asked himself: What is knowledge, who is the teacher, how can we describe culture? And in line with ancient ways of thinking he answered: "It is a light that guides and demands; a light that struggles against the shadows of ignorance."

He who does not have the light of knowledge lives in the shadows; that is to say, he does not live. But this light must be cultivated. It is found in universities, in books, in the written word. Since it is a guiding light, it demands, scolds, warns, and appeals to all of us who have access to the alphabet. Our duty is to transmit it to the ignorant, to those who live in the shadows.

Mestizaje (the mixture of races and cultures), said José Vasconcelos, is not only in the blood; it is also in the spirit. Mexico is a mestizo country and the light of knowledge must be given to all. This is stressed by the motto of the National University of Mexico: "*Por mi raza hablará el espíritu*" (The spirit will speak for my race)—the spirit's values will speak for my mestizo race. We must strive to make culture what Nezahualcóyotl desired: a light that guides and demands. **M**

Hugo B. Margáin

Editorial Director.



Books are the greatest inheritance of mankind.