

Francisco Javier Alegre. A Mexican Latinist of the Eighteenth Century

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Francisco Javier Alegre (1729-1788) belongs to that erudite group of Mexican Jesuits of the eighteenth century, which includes such distinguished authors as Fathers Francisco Javier Clavijero, Rafael Landívar, and Diego José Abad. Of the entire group, Alegre, historian of his Order, able theologian, and outstanding representative figure of eighteenth century Mexican humanism, was probably the most versatile and enlightened, and undoubtedly the best Latinist. Born in Veracruz, he studied at the Real Universidad de México. In 1747 he entered the Company of Jesus in Tepotzotlán, where he remained for four years, during which time he studied ecclesiastical history, perfected his knowledge of Latin and Castilian, and began to learn Greek, Hebrew, and Italian. He became professor of literature at the Colegio Máximo de San Pedro y San Pablo. In 1764 Alegre was chosen, on the basis of his exceptional intellectual abilities, to write the history of the Jesuit Order in New Spain. Three years later, when he was about to complete the work, Charles III ordered the Jesuits to leave all Spanish dominions. He eventually took up residence in Bologna and devoted himself to teaching and to the preparation of his philosophical and literary works.

Alegre's published work consists of several short compositions in Latin and Spanish, a translation, with extensive commentary, of Boileau's *Art Poétique*, the *Alexandriad*, an epic poem on the siege of Tyre by Alexander the Great, a Latin translation of the *Iliad*, and *Principles of Theology*, in seven volumes, the *magnum opus* of our author. My purpose here

is to provide a brief notice of the *Alexandriad* and *Principles of Theology*.

The first version of the *Alexandriad*, bearing the dates 1749-1751, and believed to have been written while the author was in Tepotzotlán, is in manuscript form.¹ Consisting originally of three books, it was expanded to four and appeared in published form in 1773 under the pseudonym of Ponciano Tugnoni.² In 1776 the poem was included in the second volume of the Bologna edition of Alegre's translation of the *Iliad*.³ Both editions contain an epilogue in the form of a letter to a friend of the poet's by the name of Antonio.⁴ The author explains in this letter, in essence an apology for his literary procedure in the poem, that he originally composed it at the age of nineteen or twenty. He strongly felt that Alexander, who displayed a "near-divine dignity of mind" (pene divinam animi magnitudinem, p. 283) and was involved in "many astonishing and distinguished situations" (plura. . . mira atque praeclara, p. 283), was a most fitting subject for epic poetry.

Alegre's letter, or essay, is a solid reflection of the neo-classic literary principles upheld by a significant group of Hispanic writers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Adhering basically to Horace's principles of unity and concision of action. Alegre states that simplicity, which is desirable in other poetic compositions, is especially fitting in epic verse, although it is quite proper to adorn epic narration with instruction and moral and political examples. Especially in the

¹ This manuscript, entitled "Alexandriados, seu de obsidione Tyri ab Alexandro Magno, libri tres", was discovered in the Biblioteca Nacional de México by the eminent nineteenth-century scholar, Joaquín García Icazbalceta.

² *Pontiani Tugnonii civis mexicani Alexandriados, sive de expugnatione Tyri ab Alexandro, libri quatuor* (Forolivii, 1773).

³ *Homeri Ilias latino carmine expressa, cui accedit ejusdem Alexandrias, sive de expugnatione Tyri ab Alexandro Macedone, libri quatuor*, 2 vols. (Bononiae, 1776).

⁴ The epilogue of the 1773 edition is entitled "Xaverius Antonio S. P. D." (pp. 71-82). "Xaverius" is obviously Alegre. The identity of the author is "disguised" in the 1776 edition: "Desiderius Antonio Suo Suavissimo S. P. D." (pp. 283-292). This, of course, was and is a common literary device. All references in this article to the epilogue are from the 1776 edition.

first version of the *Alexandriad* the poet was, in his own words, "seized by youthful passion" (juvenali calore abreptum, p. 284), and pretended to do no more than "indulge in the pastime of writing verse" (versificandi facilitati indulsisse, p. 284). The final, much expanded and polished version of the poem, however, appeared a good twenty-five years after the initial product of "youthful passion", when the poet was forty-seven years old. Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, the eminent Spanish critic, dismisses the *Alexandriad* as a "poemita épico" and "ejercicio de estilo",⁵ at the same time repeating the bibliographical error of García Icazbalceta by alluding to a non-existent 1775 edition, supposedly published in Forlì, and expanded to five books.⁶ While the *Alexandriad* is not another *Aeneid*, I believe it is fair to say that it goes beyond a typical school exercise; a school exercise is hardly characterized by such extensive revision and two printed editions. The literary quality of this work, composed by the best eighteenth century Mexican Latinist, compares favorably with that of Diego José Abad's *De Deo* and Rafael Landívar's *Rusticatio Mexicana*, the two best-known long Latin poems of Spanish America.

As a good neo-classicist, Alegre is concerned with verisimilitude, or plausibility, and realistic portrayal. His information, he claims in the epilogue, will be based on authoritative sources. He stresses that in a work of fiction, the poet aims at achieving plausibility (verisimilitudo), not truth (veritas). As for plausibility, the poet sees no contradiction in the presence of mythological personages in his work, for the "knot" (nodus) of the *Alexandriad* is tied by the hatred of Juno and Neptune for Alexander. By Juno and Neptune, he says, we must understand the two mutual forces of air and water, or the sea, which was detrimental to Alexander during the siege of Tyre. Also, the inclusion of Hercules is justifiable by the fact that according to St. Augustine Alexander worshipped

⁵ *Historia de la poesía hispanoamericana*, I. (Santander: Aldus, 1948), 84.

⁶ See Joaquín García Icazbalceta, *Opúsculos inéditos latinos y castellanos del P. Francisco Javier Alegre* (México, 1889: Imprenta de Francisco Díaz de León), p. vi: *Alexandriados, sive de expugnatione Tyri ab Alexandro Macedone libri V* (Forolivii, 1775). [Reimpresa con la *Ilíada*, 1776. V. infra].

pagan gods, and the Roman historian Curtius mentions that Hercules appeared before Alexander in dreams. Reference is made to modern authors who have included pagan deities in their works, such as Sannazaro having Proteus predict the birth of Jesus. The use of pagan deities is not a question of belief but is rather a poetic device, says Alegre in defense of a literary practice prevalent among neo-classic poets.

Regarding the narration of the story and the poetic style of the *Alexandriad*, the author confesses a "childlike adherence to Vergil" (puerilem Virgilio adhaesionem, p. 289). Indeed, there is heavy imitation of both Vergil and Homer. Imitation, he notes, characterizes the best poets since the fourteenth century. The purpose of imitation is, of course, to improve upon the original, and often "it is very easy to add to things already created a new luster and beauty." (inventis addere facillimum est, novum rebus splendorem, ac pulchritudinem, p. 290).

Alegre's principal source, by his own admission, is Quintus Curtius Rufus, author of *De gestis Alexandri Magni*, a work which reflects the Peripatetic view of Alexander, namely, that he is a tyrant favored by Fortune. Curtius represents Alexander as being a most admirable, courageous, and virtuous king, up to the death of Darius. From that point, his character undergoes a change. Among other things, he indulges in base desires, his former self-control and moderation are replaced by wantonness and pride, and he orders or condones such cruel acts as torture, massacre, and crucifixion. William W. Tarn says that in Curtius there is "complete lack of historical principle," and cites the opinion of Ulrich von Wilamowitz, that the work was written merely for entertainment.⁷ According to *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*,⁸ "Curtius gives some invaluable information mixed with much rubbish." As for the siege of Tyre, perhaps Alexander's greatest military feat, Curtius's version, as compared with those of Arrian and Dio-

⁷ William W. Tarn, *Alexander the Great. The Sources*, II (Cambridge: The University Press), 92.

⁸ 2nd ed. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1970), p. 41.

dorus Siculus, is truly, as Alegre states, the most "ornata." In other words, Curtius is the one who most "glamorizes" the history of Alexander.

Book I begins with a dramatic scene in the Tyrian senate, where there is debate as to how to deal with Alexander. The Tyrians, called deceitful, are made to look bad, especially when they kill Alexander's ambassadors, who were seeking a peaceful accord. This book, reminiscent of the *Iliad*, ends with a catalog of the main leaders in Alexander's army.

In Book II, Alexander reveals his plan to build a mole, or causeway, from the shore to Tyre, and in this way penetrate the mighty Tyrian wall. We are treated to a lavish scene in the palace of Neptune, who, with Juno, rushes to the aid of the Tyrians. Meanwhile, the Tyrians undermine the mole, and smash it with a fire-ship. Fortune is temporarily on the side of the Tyrians.

In Book III we see Alexander visiting Jaddus, the high-priest of the Temple at Jerusalem. Alegre seems to have confused Jaddua, who knew Alexander and who was one of those who sealed the covenant, with Jaddus, another priest of the Old Testament. The historical basis for this is found only in Josephus, in the *Antiquities of the Jews*.⁹ Jaddus predicts victory for Alexander, and at this point Alegre utilizes the occasion to condemn the worship of pagan gods. He has Jaddus explain to Alexander the nature of the true God, which reminds one of St. Thomas's definition of God. Alexander returns to Tyre and encourages his men. At dinner, as they proceed to cut stale loaves of bread, blood begins to gush out. This is interpreted as a good omen for the Greek cause. Next, there is a digression on the exploits of King Philip, and Book III ends suspensefully as a fleet comes from the Peloponnesus to aid the Macedonians.

Book IV is full of action. As the Macedonians ram the Tyrian wall and break through it, Mars gives strategic advice to Alexander. In direct imitation of the *Aeneid*, Juno gets

⁹ *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston, I (Philadelphia: Grigg, Elliot and Co., 1849), 386-388.

Aeolus to harass the Greeks with a raging storm, which later subsides at Jove's request. Excitement is sustained by the appearance of a sea-monster and further furious fighting. The Tyrians hope to appease their gods by sacrificing a free-born boy, but this revolting idea, offensive to neo-classic, not to mention Christian sensitivity, is quickly quashed. The dramatic pitch rises, and we see Alexander in his best fighting form. In combat he slays the important Tyrian leaders, whereup the poem abruptly ends with the victory of the Macedonians. In the very last lines, the poet expresses the hope that some day "in more solemn verse" (*graviore cothurno*, 584) he will sing the praises of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Gerard Decorme, upon listing some of the works of Alegre in his classical work on the Mexican Jesuits, adds in parenthesis after mention of the *Alexandriad*, "lástima de tiempo perdido."¹⁰ Rather than feel daunted by this less than enthusiastic pronouncement, I decided that there should be at least one contemporary reader of what was obviously a great effort.¹¹ Impressive is the fact that many skilful Latin hexameters should come from such a modern writer as Alegre.

But rarely is a neo-classic work gratuitous. Alegre created a flawless Alexander, who, by persistence, intellect, and courage, and not without a little luck through support from the gods and fate, overcame what seemed insurmountable odds. In a word, Alexander represents a moral triumph.

The Tyrians, on the other hand, had many defects: they were overconfident, deceitful, cruel in the murder of the Macedonian ambassadors, and neglectful of religious obligations. Morally inferior, they had to be defeated by the "morally superior" Macedonians. Alexander's respect for the "true God" is underscored, and he prefigures the Christian hero in his goodness, humanity, and religiosity. Indeed, none of the cruel acts attributed to Alexander by the historians are hinted at in

¹⁰ *La obra de los jesuitas mexicanos durante la época colonial. 1572-1767*, I (México: Antigua Librería de José Porrúa e hijos), 226.

¹¹ I am pleased to report that my good friend Dr. Jeffrey H. Kaimowitz, classicist and curator of the Watkinson Library of Trinity College, is preparing an English translation of the *Alexandriad*.

the *Alexandriad*. Alegre claims to have used material found in the historians, but this by no means implies an historical approach. Truly, virtue is one of the guiding lights of the neo-classic mind, and virtue is basic to Alegre's Alexander. By his own admission, "pius Aeneas" is the model for Alexander, just as Vergil's hexameters are the models for Alegre's. We are reminded that for most neo-classicists, the *Aeneid* was the best poem of the best poet.

The plan of the *Alexandriad* consists of a single action, with swift movement, a variety of scenes both realistic and supernatural, and linguistic embellishment. The complex similes and imagery are more in tune with the Spanish baroque than with neo-classic poetry. Although totally unknown, untranslated and unstudied, the *Alexandriad* within the context of Ibero-American neo-Latin poetry from its sixteenth-century beginnings to the present, ranks, in my opinion, with the three or four major "epic" poems of its class.

The second work we are considering, *Principles of Theology*,¹² is Alegre's *magnum opus*. The author himself considered this work, to which he devoted eighteen years of intensive effort, his most substantial. Menéndez y Pelayo rightly praised it for "the solidity of its doctrine" and the "classical purity of its Latin."¹³

One must distinguish in *Principles of Theology* two aspects: its main purpose, which is a systematic *exposé* of the *corpus* of theological science; and apart from this, the circumstantial and complimentary points on a great variety of themes, more in accordance with the free expansion of the author's genius. Alegre's model is the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, and consequently, in the theological aspect, the reader finds nothing essentially new. On the other hand, the work begins to arouse interest when the author confronts contemporary philosophical doctrines which ignore or combat dogma.

¹² *Institutionum theologicarum libri xviii, in quibus omnia Catholicae ecclesiae dogmata, praecepta, mysteria, sacramenta, ritus adversus paganos, haereticos, et recentiores philosophos asseruntur, et explicantur*, 7 vols. (Venezii, 1789-1791).

¹³ *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España*, III (Santander, 1940), 306.

Alegre, a sincere believer, remains true to orthodoxy, but reveals clearly that he knows many modern philosophers and thinkers whose ideas are contrary to his own, as his references to such figures as Voltaire, Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Mirabeau, Pufendorf, and Leibniz indicate. Alegre is at his most interesting when he deals with themes that he considers open to free discussion, such as the question of slavery, or the origin of civil authority. His stated purpose in composing this work is to serve as a kind of apologist for St. Thomas, whose relevance is being challenged in an age of encyclopedism, which is characterized in the following unflattering and naturalistic terms in the preliminary introduction entitled "Episcopo Angelopolitano" (To the Bishop of Puebla): "Our stupid and vulgar age loves triviality, and rejects, just as a queasy stomach, the solid doctrine of Catholic faith." (*Saeculum insipiens, et inficetum nugas amat, et solidam Catholicae fidei doctrinam, velut languente stomacho respuit.*) (I, iii).¹⁴ For Alegre, no other Catholic theologian is so complete, lucid, and capable as St. Thomas. Alegre, for his part, will not merely rehash St. Thomas, but will present him objectively and vitally, "speaking in a style and method adapted to the present times." ("ad praesentia tempora accomodato stylo, ac methodo loquentem.") (I, vi). The end result is a rich personal commentary that reveals a truly impressive erudition as well as a keen mind with independence of thought, all within the confines of Catholic dogma. While Alegre cannot be called a modern philosopher, his scholastic approach is enlightened in the sense that many matters relating to religious as well as scientific thought are considered open to discussion. In his own words,

Therefore, scholastic controversy concerning truths either revealed or, from another direction, demonstrated and ascertained through science or experimentalism have been, are, and will always be matters of delicate judgment.

¹⁴ In this and all following citations from *Institutiones*, the first numeral refers to the volume, and the second, to the page.

Fuerunt ergo, sunt, eruntque semper subtiliores, et Scholasticae controversiae circa veritates vel revelatas, vel per scientiam, aut experientiam aliunde cognitae, ac demonstratas.

(“Praefatio,” I, 4-5)

In all areas that concern the human intellect, such as physics, ethics, theology, politics, geometry, there will always be new concepts, he observes. Alegre concludes the “Praefatio” by saying that although Catholic theology is in effect St. Thomas, in his exposition of the saint’s ideas, “we nevertheless shall not follow his words blindly,” (Non tamen in ejus verba jurantes sequimur,) (I, 10). In other words, as an open-minded scholar, he will expound critically. This is borne out by the development of certain themes in the *Principles of Theology*. As an example of a theme of current interest, let us see how Alegre deals in a vital way with the question of African slavery in America. He discusses slavery in general in Book VI, “De homine, et ejus dotibus naturalibus” (Vol. III, 287-291), and in Book VIII, “De legibus” (Vol. IV, 70-74). In answer to the question, “Can one man come under the authority and ownership of another man?” (utrum homo sub hominis dominium, et proprietatem cadat?) (III, 287), he replies more than once that while man is free according to natural law (*jus naturalis*), he may be enslaved under the civil law (*jus Gentium*). He rejects the notion expressed by St. Augustine that “the prime cause of slavery, then, is sin.” (Prima ergo servitutis causa peccatum est (XIX, XV). In a brief historical account of slavery, he reminds us that neither Jesus, nor St. Paul, nor the early Christian Church opposed slavery.

Although he certainly does not give blanket support to the institution of slavery, Alegre explains and accepts the four classical situations by which one may legally be a slave. One is a slave (1) by being born of slaves, (2) by selling oneself into slavery, usually because of overwhelming debts, (3) by having committed a crime, or (4) by having been taken prisoner in a just war. The statement “man is by nature free” (*homo est natura liber*), which appears several times in the *Institutiones*, does not mean that this “freedom” is applicable

to all situations. The above-listed four types of slavery alluded to are examples by which man can legally lose his freedom. "[Man] is by nature naked" ([homo] est natura nudus), he remarks, but that does not mean it is unnatural to wear clothes (non tamen contra naturam est, esse vestitum). (IV, 70). Thus his conclusion is: "Nevertheless, it must be stated by the civil law of nations and the common law, man can be the slave of man" (Nihilominus dicendum est; jure Gentium, et civili hominis, hominem servum esse posse.) (III, 287). He does mention approvingly current practice, by which Christians captured in a just war by Christians, are not forced into slavery.

Where Alegre does single himself out from many of his contemporaries is in his attitude toward the Portuguese, English, and Dutch slave trade. He observes that since Charles V and Philip II prohibited the enslavement of the American Indians by means of "very human and holy laws" (humanissimis et santissimis legibus) (III, 290), well-intentioned Spaniards, moved by zealotry (zelum) rather than enlightenment (scientiam), "imposed on the nations of Africa continuous deportation, and the very harsh yoke of slavery." (Africae nationibus deportationem perpetuam, jugumque servitutis durissimum imposuerunt.) (III, 290).

Alegre points out that these Africans are neither slaves by birth, nor have been sold into slavery by either themselves or their parents, nor have been duly condemned to slavery by a legal process, nor were they taken prisoner in a just war. They were actually kidnapped by warlike, powerful tribes, whose express purpose was to sell victims to the white man. In agreement with the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit, Luis de Molina (*De justitia et jure*), he concludes that "their slavery... is utterly unjust and unconscionable." (eorum servitutem... injustam prorsus, et iniquam esse.) (III, 290). This attitude seems quite liberal for the times.

Moving to another topic, Alegre's views on society, authority and the state are an eclectic blend of enlightenment and theism. In Book VIII, "De legibus", he lists and describes

the four inequalities by nature in men: (1) women are not equal to men; (2) children are not equal to adults; (3) not all men are of equal intelligence; (4) not all men are of equal physical strength (IV, 68). In addition, referring to Plato in the *Gorgias*, he expresses this pre-Darwinian concept: "it has been determined by nature that the more outstanding take precedence over the less capable." (Nam et his natura comparatum est, ut imbecillioribus praestantiora praeferantur.) (IV, 69). As a rational humanist, he affirms: "Reason, however, and not mindless instinct, is the guide to human actions." (Ratio autem, non sensitivus appetitus humanarum actionum est regula.) (IV, 69).

Men, of necessity, must live in societies in order to lead orderly lives and protect the common good. Some societies have chosen democracies, others oligarchies, and still others monarchies. (Alegre expresses no preference for any one of these forms of government.) He says, "Any [government], therefore, drew its authority from a pact or agreement made by men." (Quodcumque igitur Imperium sit, ab hominum conventionem, et pacto duxit originem.) So far, our writer sounds like a French *philosophe*, not unlike Rousseau, whom he often quotes in order to refute, such as he does Hobbes and Voltaire. But our illusion is soon broken by the concept that although men elect their kings, ultimately, they are carrying out God's choice. "There is, therefore, in truth, no government that does not come consciously or unconsciously from God." (Non est igitur potestas, nisi a Deo, vel mediate scilicet, vel immediate.) (III, 77) Even if a bad king should be chosen, God preordained this choice. This is not in accord with the political philosophy of St. Thomas, who felt that an evil ruler must be resisted, presumably by the Church. And unlike St. Thomas, Alegre believes that civil rulers should not be subject to the Pope. In this respect, Alegre's religionist and conservative view would preclude the possibility of violent political action or rebellion against a tyrannical government. It somehow does not appear to mesh with his other seemingly enlightened views on government.

As a final curious note, it is interesting to see what he has to say about the role of women, a subject that is very topical in our time. Before quoting him, let us hasten to say that his opinion was I am sure standard for his time, and he should not be singled out as something unique. The following quote is from the section on the family, which corresponds to a sociological manual.

Thence, the first and most ancient inequality comes from the difference between the sexes, whereby the woman, being the weaker sex, is naturally destined to conception, childbirth, nursing, and domestic duties and is subject to the control of the foresight of a husband.

Inde prima, et antiquissima inaequalitas provenit ab sexus diversitate, juxta quam foemina imbecillior conceptioni, partui, lactationi, et domesticis curis destinata naturaliter est viri providentiae, ac regimini subjecta.

(III, 66)

At this point Alegre, in a humorous mood and not without some degree of innocent maliciousness and what today would be regarded as anti-feminist, says, "Martial put it nicely and sharply": (*Hinc pulcre, ac sapienter Martialis, p. 67*).

*Inferior matrona suo sit, Prisce, marito,
Non aliter fuerint foemina, virque pares.*

Let the mistress of the house be subordinate to her husband, Priscus, for in no other way would husband and wife be equals.

(IX, 12)

I have discussed briefly two examples of the type of more timely topics, interesting for a contemporary general audience, that one finds in the *Institutiones*. What needs to be done is that this work, which contains numerous philosophical and theological topics, must be carefully examined, and the essence of its ideas incorporated into the study of the history of phi-

losophy in Mexico. It seems to me clear that for the eighteenth century, no other one Mexican work is so rich in ideas.

In conclusion, it is my hope that these two substantial, ignored neo-Latin works, will be accorded the attention they deserve. The only scholar that attempted to make an initial foray into the *Institutiones* was Gabriel Méndez Plancarte, who, in an article published in 1940,¹⁵ made the scholarly world aware of Alegre's seven-volume theological work. The article reflects Méndez Plancarte's discouragement at the fact that many important Mexican writers of the past have been ignored. His desperation is shown in the remark, "Tanto nos lo han repetido, dentro y fuera de casa, que hemos acabado por creer que México es tierra fértil solamente en crímenes y en revoluciones."¹⁶ It is true that since 1940, nearly half a century later, nothing more has appeared on Alegre's seven volume treatise. With renewed scholarly interest in Mexico's colonial culture, we trust that this situation will change.

¹⁵ "Un gran teólogo mexicano, Francisco Javier Alegre", *Abside*, IV (abril 1940), 3-17.

¹⁶ "Un gran teólogo", p. 3.

