The past living on in the present “is not lost innocence, but integrated knowledge.”

Aníbal Quijano

The idea that historical rupture is fundamental to the condition of modernity, as proposed by Marshall Berman and others, has been widely questioned in Latin America. Conservatives have not been alone in expressing fears about the consequences of profound upheaval: even revolutionary movements, committed to modernizing policies, have tended to cast themselves not so much as a break with the past as the culmination of its underlying trends. When Castro declared that history would absolve him, he was not only expressing faith in the judgment of the future, but also claiming legitimacy from his identification with a long line of “rebels against tyranny,” from the sages of ancient India and China all the way down the centuries to Rousseau and Tom Paine. The Mexican Revolution was born alongside “a burning defence of the past”; the Cuban Revolution declared its own end of history long before Fukuyama wrote his famous book; and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua represented their revolution as the long-deferred triumph of Sandino’s heroic struggle against U.S. occupation in the 1920s. Latin American revolutions have tended not to repudiate the past, as happened in France and Soviet Russia, but instead, to stake a claim to transcendent continuity based on creative assimilation of the past. In the context of what Carlos Fuentes has dubbed the “Nescafé civilization” of Latin America, in which
advocates of technocratic modernity have long claimed that it was possible to become “instantly modern by excluding the past and negating tradition,”4 the very decision to accept even some aspects of the past has paradoxically acquired a potentially revolutionary impetus. Thus, the relationship between history and the modern in Latin America turns not only on the key political issues of which past, and whose past, is in play, but also on epistemological questions about how history is conceived. As has been extensively explored by cultural critics, the theme of overlapping temporalities—the coexistence of different perceptions of time and history—has reverberated through many Latin American literary texts since the late nineteenth century, from the novels of Machado de Assis to the stories of Borges and the poetry of Vallejo. This chapter explores the relationship between modernity and history in Latin America through the lens of Alfonso Reyes of Mexico (1889–1959), in whose work can be found an early development of ideas that would nowadays be referred to as transculturation or hybridity.

Rodó had raised the question of how modern Latin America could exist in history: Reyes devoted his life to working out an answer. Although he wrote poetry and fiction that were well received, Reyes’s reputation during his lifetime was primarily founded on an extraordinary range of essays, reviews, and commentaries upon the arts, literature, history, politics, and science of Europe, the Americas, and beyond. Celebrated at the time for his in-depth knowledge of the classics (he translated part of The Iliad into Spanish verse)5 and Golden Age Spanish culture, he is often dismissed today—as Rodó is—as a conservative Hellenist and Hispanist, worthy of note mainly for his highly successful term as the first director of the prestigious Colegio de México. Yet he was thought of by his contemporaries as a man of “absolute modernity.”6 They habitually referred to him as “the humanist,” which, in the context of early-twentieth-century Mexico, did not just mean a classical scholar, but rather someone who was “aware of his social responsibilities, in command of a culture not besieged by the limitations of excessive specialisation, an enthusiast for other disciplines that help him the better to know his own, eager in short to keep up to date with scientific progress so that he can try to channel it for the world’s benefit.”7 Mexicans have long celebrated their version of humanism, which dated back to the sixteenth century, for being a movement in touch with the people, not one that set itself apart from the vulgar herd, as European Renaissance humanism was thought to be.8 Reyes was acclaimed during his own era for having adapted this distinguished tradition to modern conditions. More