

The Presence and Transformation of the Ten Essay Modalities Established by José Luis Martínez in *El ensayo mexicano moderno*.

Presencia y transformación de las diez modalidades de ensayo establecidas por
José Luis Martínez en *El ensayo mexicano moderno*.


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Abstract:

The year 1958 marked a milestone in Mexican literature with the release of José Luis Martínez's anthology *El ensayo mexicano moderno*. This two-volume work established itself as a foundational text in the country's essayistic tradition. In his well-known "Introduction," Martínez identified ten key modalities of Mexican essay writing, ranging from literary creation to fantasy essays to journalistic chronicles. The objective of this article is to trace the evolution of these modalities by examining three pivotal moments in their development. Rather than perceiving these modalities as static prescriptions, the study aspires to delve into their genesis and evolution over time. Additionally, by examining their impact on essayistic discourse and their role in shaping the voices of new writers, the article reflects on their current relevance in both education and essayistic production.

Keywords: Comparative literature. 20th century. Utopia. Imagination.

Resumen:

En 1958 el lanzamiento de la antología *El ensayo mexicano moderno* de José Luis Martínez marcó un hito en el panorama literario mexicano al posicionar rápidamente sus dos volúmenes como una obra precursora en la tradición ensayística mexicana. En su célebre "Introducción", Martínez propuso diez modalidades en que se presenta con mayor frecuencia el discurso ensayístico mexicano, desde la creación literaria hasta el ensayo de fantasía o crónica periodística. Este artículo tiene como objetivo reconstruir la evolución de estas modalidades a través de tres momentos clave de su gestación.

Más allá de considerarlas simples categorías prescriptivas, se busca comprender sus orígenes y transformaciones a lo largo del tiempo, planteando interrogantes sobre su presencia en la enseñanza y producción ensayística contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Antologías de ensayo. Ensayo hispanoamericano del siglo XX y XXI. Teoría crítica del ensayo

A few months ago, at the end of a lecture on José Luis Martínez and his anthology *El ensayo mexicano moderno* (The Modern Mexican Essay), a couple of professors, between confession and nostalgic evocation, told me that the anthology had indeed been a "decisive" part of their literary education from secondary school through university, that is, from their youth until the stage of vocational consolidation, the essay from the perspective of José Luis Martínez cemented, both for them and for "their generation," three fundamental aspects: a) what an essay is and what should be understood by it; b) how essayistic discourse is defined and divided; and c) how it should not only be commented on, but also written.

I am, of course, unaware of the details of this event (if by event we mean the fact that a book, just one book, is a "decisive" part of anyone's literary education). If I understand anything—if I can deduce anything now that I have taken it upon myself to ask—it is that the confessional part comes from the fact that I have read and reread, perhaps as a teaching requirement, *El ensayo mexicano moderno* as a kind of literary prescription, which naturally led to situating the more general coordinates of essayistic discourse from and based on a single subject. On the other hand, the nostalgic part, that is, the longing for the days gone by, corresponds to the fact that in their own professional careers, that is, as university lecturers, there has been no reason, theoretical or practical, to return to the anthology.

The news, if we want to see it as something new, should come as no surprise to anyone, since in the decades following 1958, the year of its first edition, José Luis Martínez's anthology established itself as an essential reference for the study and initial understanding of the Mexican essay. In any case, the comments of the professors—from Colima and Jalisco respectively, both in their sixties and both full-time faculty members—serve to highlight a well-known but forgotten fact: *El ensayo mexicano moderno*, which could well be the most important panoramic essay anthology in Mexico, maintained a leading presence in the teaching

and transmission of the essay, whose didactic clarity, expository simplicity, and methodological framework seduced more than one teacher, more than one student, and of course—above all—more than one essayist and more than one anthologist.

I use the past tense — I said "maintained" and not "maintains" — because I do not have, and I very much doubt that anyone can be certain, whether this is still the case. What I mean is that, after asking around, searching through the few course syllabuses available online (both current and obsolete), reviewing bibliographies and institutional repositories, and even drawing on my own experience as a researcher, teacher and occasional workshop leader, I have the impression—purely subjective, purely personal—that the anthology is in the process of becoming a dusty relic. It is well known, of course, and I am sure that it lives on in the memory of many essayists—in fact, it must be said that the essay as "literature of ideas," a notion firmly established in Martínez's anthology, is at the centre of numerous competitions, scholarships and other cultural and academic interludes—but there is an unavoidable generational issue that is dangerously close to being forgotten.

Much to my regret, however, I must accept that my hunch is gaining strength at a discouraging pace. Recently, when I shared my concern with a famous essayist, with numerous publications to his name, perhaps a few years younger than the professors, his response suggested that *El ensayo mexicano moderno* is imbued with a kind of political and literary patina to which we should not accustom young writers, so that he, like some in his close circle, tends to omit any trace of it so as not to promote the vices of the market. I do not agree, but I understand. Anthologies can be evil, but they are by no means useless. Could they not be used to enrich a chronological view of the essay, even considering their inherent bias? Could the editorial lines of many indexed magazines, cultural supplements, and literary competitions not be found in the guiding principles of *El ensayo mexicano moderno*, for example? Of course they could! José Luis Martínez's anthology still has a long way to go, not only because it is an almost unexplored milestone in the evolution of the Mexican essay—with which we may or may not agree—but also because it is the gateway to a well-established writing practice in our country,

which is otherwise extremely rich, and without which (or precisely because of which) the shifts in the essay from the middle of the last century to the present day can be accounted for.

I may be exaggerating, but I don't think I'm wrong in saying that one of the most common uses of El ensayo mexicano moderno has been as a source of inspiration. It is usually taught, if it is still taught at all, in a prescriptive manner, as an example or method to be followed, but it rarely goes beyond a purely instructional approach. And in its well-known Prologue, which José Luis Martínez called "Introduction," we find one of its most exploited aspects: I am referring to the ten modalities or forms into which José Luis Martínez divided essayistic discourse according to style, tone, and interests. The ten modalities are: essay as a genre of literary creation; short, poetic essay; essay of fantasy, wit or digression; essay-discourse or prayer (doctrinal); interpretative essay; theoretical essay; literary criticism essay; expository essay; essay-chronicle or memoirs; short, journalistic essay.

I am not here, then, to legitimise or claim the relevance of an anthology. In this article, I aim to offer a perspective, historical if you will, on the progression and transformation of these types as they were given rise to by the published works of a young José Luis Martínez. I am convinced that in doing so—that is, by mentioning how they began and how they ended, based on who they were made by and what or who their influences may have been—the obvious pedagogical burden of the anthology becomes a means for debate.

Getting down to business

I will begin with a few quick generalities. During the first half of 1958, the first edition of El Ensayo Mexicano Moderno was launched, included in issues 39 and 40 of the "Letras Mexicanas" collection of the Fondo de Cultura Económica. The task of selecting the material fell to José Luis Martínez, who, having just turned forty, was recognised as one of the most prominent critics of his generation. Five years after Antonio Castro Leal's *Antología de la poesía mexicana moderna* (Anthology of Modern Mexican Poetry, 1953) and eight years before the launch of *Poesía en movimiento* (Poetry in Motion, 1966) by Octavio Paz and company, El ensayo mexicano moderno stands out as a pioneering work in an environment where



compilations (especially poetic ones) play a fundamental role in the configuration, preservation and reinvention of the Mexican literary tradition.

The anthology has had three editions: 1958, 1971, 2001, with reprints in 1984, 1995, 2002, and 2016. The initial edition presented fifty-six authors divided into two volumes: thirty-two in the first and twenty-four in the second. The first volume was dedicated to writers of the 19th century, beginning with Justo Sierra (1848-1912) and ending with Daniel Cosío Villegas (1898-1976), while the second volume focused on 20th-century authors, from Jaime Torres Bodet (1902-1976) to Pablo González Casanova (1922-2023). In total, ninety-four essays were included, sixty in the first volume and thirty-four in the second, mostly addressing the country's most pressing historical and cultural challenges. Four thousand copies of each volume were printed. Carlos Villegas and Alí Chumacero were responsible for the editing, although they are no longer mentioned in the credits for the third and final version.

Thirteen years passed between the first and second editions, making it necessary to restructure and expand the original content to reflect more recent developments. The essence of the previous edition was maintained, although the number of authors was reduced to thirty in the first volume —"whose promise had faded over the years"— and increased to twenty-nine in the second —since [some writers] "should take their rightful place". The biobibliographical notes were updated, some texts from the first edition were removed or replaced, and new essayists were added, including José Alvarado (1911-1974), Ramón Xirau (1924-2017), Jaime García Terrés (1924-1996), Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012), Juan García Ponce (1932-2001), and Carlos Monsiváis (1938-2010). The note accompanying the second edition highlights a warning probably directed at those who criticised the permanent absence of José Revueltas: essays on politics, philosophy, sociology and economics are included if and only if they exhibit "the speculation and literary treatment characteristic of the essay".

At the dawn of the 21st century, the definitive version was published. The note accompanying the third edition is signed in 1996, but the anthology was not published until 2001. Martínez no longer made many changes; the only changes were in volume 2, which was strengthened with new texts by authors such as Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, and Carlos

Monsiváis written between 1991 and 1993. While the first edition of volume 2 had 414 pages, the latest has 676. If we also consider that the oldest essay—'Estética de la prosa' (Aesthetics of Prose) by Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera—dates from 1893, *El ensayo mexicano moderno* covers a whole century of essay writing. Thus, the third edition brings together a total of 118 essays (119 with the "Introduction"), divided into sixty-six in the first volume and fifty-two in the second, written by fifty-nine Mexican authors born between 1848 and 1938. With the recent passing of Pablo González Casanova in 2023 at the age of 101, all the essayists in the anthology have now died.

The ten categories

To gain a less superficial understanding of their provenance, origin, or motivation, two issues must be clarified: the first is that José Luis Martínez's classificatory spirit stems from his adherence to two works that preceded his own: *Del ensayo americano* (1945) by Medardo Vitier, and the Spanish anthology *El concepto contemporáneo de España. Antología de ensayos (1895-1931)* (1946) by Ángel del Río and M.J Benardete. This is no secret: both references are openly cited in "Formas afines y modalidades del ensayo" (Related forms and modalities of the essay), the second section of the "Introduction", which effectively outlines "ten stratifications of non-narrative prose" whose "flexibility" and "formal and ideological freedom" live "in the modern thinking [of] this fluid body that is the essay" (p.13). By naming any text that delves deeply and moderately broadly into the discussion of a specific topic an "essay," such openness leads to classification anxieties. Vitier conceives of the essay mainly in three forms: the newspaper article on immediate topics, the critical study based on scholarship and rigorous method, and the monograph of an educational nature and exhaustive scope. Del Río and Benardete offer another tripartite division: the pure essay (whether philosophical, historical, or literary), the poetic-descriptive essay (focused on the lyrical recreation of the landscape), and the critical-scholarly essay (typical of the academic sphere).

It is easy to see that the six divisions account for more than half of the ten categories. This is not crude imitation: Martínez is executing a manoeuvre that seeks to reorganise—even

fabricate!—the tradition of the essay in Mexico by incorporating its most recent anthological habits. This is the first thing I want to make clear: Martínez's ten categories clearly originate from panoramic essay works that propose their own division, because cataloguing, labelling and dividing the essay is at the heart of essay theory from the middle of the last century (today, for example, it is almost an insult). The first panoramic anthology of essays has no choice: it must learn and subscribe to the famous models—in this case, the gesture of dividing, classifying, and reordering—in order to synchronise with Spanish America. Keep in mind that José Luis Martínez has in his hands an anthology that, until 1958, is unique in its kind and that, over the next few years, would find its way not only onto Mexican bookshelves but also into the most recent branches of the Fondo de Cultura Económica in Buenos Aires, Peru, and Spain. Positioning a profuse but scattered tradition requires a local taxonomy, the intention of which is to clear up the equation of the essay in strictly literary terms. By 1958, Mexico was a country mainly of prose writers and poets; after the arrival of *El ensayo mexicano moderno*, no one would doubt that our essayistic universe went beyond two or three members of the Ateneo. The ten modalities outlined by José Luis Martínez contribute enormously to this project of belonging and original affirmation.

Second issue: in *Una amistad literaria. Correspondencia 1942-1959* (2018), the letters between Alfonso Reyes and José Luis Martínez, researcher Rodrigo Martínez Baracs—his son and one of the book's editors—reports that the ten categories went through three stages of development (see table). In his article 'El ensayo y la crítica en México. 1940-1946' (The Essay and Criticism in Mexico. 1940-1946), which forms part of the first edition of *Literatura Mexicana Siglo XX. 1940-1946* (20th Century Mexican Literature. 1940-1946), Martínez embarks on a first attempt to categorise essays based on Mexican literary production in the mid-1940s. This text, written in 1946, shows that the early stages of the categories were devised based on the essayistic production of several authors who would later form part of his anthology. Six years later, in an article published in *Cuadernos Americanos* entitled "La obra de Alfonso Reyes" (The Work of Alfonso Reyes) (1952), Martínez revises and slightly modifies them, adding an interesting feature: the categories are now specific and directly adaptable to

the essayistic work of his teacher and comrade Alfonso Reyes, placing in the curriculum of a single man what previously described an entire generation. Finally, in 1958, in *El ensayo mexicano moderno*, where they had matured, Martínez made additional adjustments, eliminating the eleventh classification, "Treatise" —leaving it would have undermined the "flexibility" and "formal and ideological freedom" defended in his "Introduction"— while the other categories underwent only minor modifications (See: Tabla 1).

Table 1

"The Essay and Criticism in Mexico 1940-1946" (1946)	"The Work of Alfonso Reyes" (1952)	<i>The Modern Mexican Essay</i> (1958)
1) Literary creative essay;	1) Essays as a genre of literary creation;	1) Essay as a genre of literary creation;
2) Essays on literary topics or literary science;	2) Short, poetic essay;	2) Short, poetic essay;
3) Essays on philosophical topics;	3) Fantasy, ingenious or rambling essay;	3) Fantasy, ingenious or rambling essay;
4) Essays on artistic issues or art criticism;	4) Essay-discourse or speech (doctrinal);	4) Essay-discourse or speech (doctrinal);
5) Essays on political and social topics;	5) Interpretative essay;	5) Interpretative essay
6) Biographical essays;	6) Theoretical essay;	6) Theoretical essay;
7) Journalistic essays (essayistic chronicles);	7) Literary criticism essay;	7) Literary criticism essay;
8) Literary criticism essays	8) Expository essay;	8) Expository essay;
	9) Chronicle or memoir essay;	9) Chronicle or memoir essay;
	10) Short, journalistic or circumstantial essay	10) Short, journalistic essay
	11) Treatise	

Source: Own work

What prompted José Luis Martínez to first create a classification based on an overview of Mexican essays, then focus it on a single individual, only to turn it back into an overall analysis? Were they created with genuine consideration for the expressions of an era, or were they designed exclusively for Alfonso Reyes from the outset? In other words, did the categories really emerge from various authors, or did he always have a single author in mind who, in turn, represented them all?

To speak of Martínez's ten modalities necessarily implies thinking about his anthology from a clear Reyes-centric perspective. Martínez, moreover, does not hide this. In any case, he downplays it, since Alfonso Reyes is not the most anthologised essayist in his three editions (López Velarde's short meditations number ten, for example, compared to Reyes' five essays), nor is he the one who takes up the most pages in the anthology (in the third and final edition, Paz's essays cover sixty-four pages, compared to Reyes' thirty-five). He is, however, the author who receives the most passionate and extensive bio-bibliographical note. But without a doubt, the presence of Reyes that matters—the one that should matter to us; the rest is literary gossip, very much in keeping with anthologies—is his timely appearance at the climax of the "Introduction", when Martínez reminds the world that the essay is first and foremost a "literature of ideas", whose theoretical basis effectively belongs to the "schemes and denominations established by Alfonso Reyes in *El deslinde*" (p.10). Ignoring the detail that other authors had already announced before Reyes the ancillary nature of the essay, what matters is that Martínez said it with and through him, because from this moment on, *El ensayo mexicano moderno* unleashes the theoretical arsenal that will inevitably result in its ten modalities.

So, combining it with related anthological exercises, on the one hand, and placing the essayistic tradition in the work of our greatest essayist, on the other, are two (possible) explanations for the ten modalities of the essay postulated in *El ensayo mexicano moderno*. That is where they come from, and that is where we should start. Today, we know that understanding the essay through its "most frequent" representations would force us to increase the ten modalities to fifteen, twenty, or more. Did José Luis Martínez consider the possibility of an exponential leap? I do not know. The facts are the facts: the ten modalities did not undergo any change in any of the three editions, not even in the third and last one in 2001, when the contracts of the essay are far from being exclusively the property of the identity essay. Regardless of whether he knew it or whether he was caught in the progressive trap of his own hermeneutics, José Luis Martínez never claimed that the categories were permanent

or static, and before listing his ten modalities, he leaves a warning that should prevent us from imposing anything:

Mixing, confusing or departing from these related forms, this fluid body that is the essay lives in modern thought. Ignoring the fact that it may or may not be found in its improbable purity, the essay, on the other hand, most often presents itself in the following modalities (p.13)

"Mixing," "confusing," "deviating": three verbs that alter and transform essayistic discourse given its constant impurity, even in a strictly literary context. Dividing and classifying is not unreasonable as long as we take into account why it is done (or why it was done) in the still pending history of our national essay writing. Alfonso Reyes and José Luis Martínez, readers of Montaigne, understood that essays have a conciliatory spirit that does not conform to dogmatic order. Whether or not professors—not to mention essayists, editors, or jury members who impose and dispel their own prejudices; for example, the literary essay as the staunch enemy of the academic essay—established an understanding of essayistic discourse by kinship to the anthology, without any clarifying pause, that is another matter.

Final words

It is highly likely—as painful as it may be to remember—that anyone approaching the essay for the first time has been exposed to strict guidelines for argumentation and page requirements. Contrary to what one might think—contrary to what those who attribute to it, always with good will, an exercise of supreme freedom of immediate appropriation might think—students do not always welcome its firm lack of systematicity and its invariable porosity with singular joy. But that is precisely the point: teaching and transmitting the essay quickly throws one off balance, and that is why one must proceed step by step, with patience, without rushing. When discussing *El ensayo mexicano moderno*, it is incumbent upon us to explain in detail the reasons why the anthology works and does not work. It works, for example, to show how essayistic discourse operates in different directions (and the ten modalities are quite useful in

this regard). It does not work, for example, in the construction and consolidation of a literary canon that deliberately omits the presence of Mexican female essayists. The anthology still has much to tell us, but only if we take the time to ask it and ourselves questions: how present are the ten modalities still? To what extent do we still consider them relevant? How often are they still used with a genuine didactic purpose? Are they present in subjects, creative workshops, thesis progress colloquiums, FONCA advisory services? Why or why not? Sixty-six years after the first panoramic anthology of essays in Mexico, and after multiple editions and numerous reprints, how much could it be said that essayistic discourse contributes (or conditions)?

I imagine a class, the inevitable moment in a literary essay course when one has to get to *El ensayo mexicano moderno*. One that does not dismiss the anthology with easy laziness, such as criticising the taxonomy without assigning it a gradual evolution or a correlate that puts it into perspective. In any case, instead of asking students to memorise and include themselves in one modality or another (if this is still done), wouldn't it be better for them to read Alfonso Reyes? Doing so has an insurmountable advantage: the modern Mexican essay would become what it has always been: an exegesis of the essay in the mid-20th century, with its successes and failures, with choices that are sometimes justified and sometimes laughable. If anthologies are to serve any purpose—if, in my opinion, we must orient the functionality of essay anthologies in any direction—it is to train readers, not apprentices.

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