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ANTONIO T. DE NICOLÁS: POET OF ETERNAL RETURN

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ANTONIO T. DE NICOLÁS

Poet of Eternal Return



EDITED BY
CHRISTOPHER KEY CHAPPLE

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Antonio T. de Nicolás: Poet of Eternal Return
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*El soñador busca la mañana,
Pero siempre con la tristeza;
Los rayos del sol borran la noche;
Los sueños de color, la muerte,
Por causa de Dios, la vida.*

Hunter J.W. Joslin

In Memoriam
Ernest G. McClain

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Foreword: **A Journey of Eternal Return to Europe, Asia, America**

Antonio de Nicolás began his international journeys as a youth, landing in the Jesuit training Colleges in Andheri, Bombay (Mumbai) and Poona (Pune), Maharashtra, India, in 1948, just after India's independence. After a decade of classical Humanities, Philosophical training and mastering Greek, Latin, English, and French in addition to his native Spanish and Catalan, he moved north to Ahmedabad where he became fluent in Gujarati and took up studies of Sanskrit and Gandhian philosophy at Gujarat Vidyapeeth. This university, established by Mahātmā Gandhi, even today immerses its students in a world of simple living, including daily spinning and weaving. After some three years of reciting the sacred scriptures of Hinduism in Sanskrit, he joined the Spanish diplomatic corps, stationed in New Delhi and later visited Hong Kong and Tokyo. He was invited to teach philosophy at the University of San Francisco during the height of America's counter-cultural revolution in 1966 and earned his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Fordham University in 1971, having joined the newly formed State University of New York at Stony Brook faculty in 1969.

While at Stony Brook, his research and publication efforts exploded on several fronts. His early books reflected his immersion experiences in India, the first of which focused on the *Rg Veda*, the oldest surviving text ever composed. *Four Dimensional Man* (1971), revised as *Meditations Through the Rg Veda* (1977), outlines the foundations of Indian thought through the explication of four basic "languages" that signal the progressive unfolding and spiraling of the human condition from chaos to structured form, from intentional acts to embodied vision, in a continuous movement of both subject and world. His co-translations of Vedic hymns with the late John Chethimattam breathe new life into verses long neglected by both philosophers and indologists, and these translations become more powerful when de Nicolás dresses them in the poetry and rhythm of the original chants. His second major project, *Avatāra: The Humanization of Philosophy through the Bhagavad Gītā* (1976), includes a new translation of Gandhi's favorite book interpreted through the prism of the Spanish perspectival existentialism espoused by Ortega y Gasset. This approach elucidates the many Yoga techniques found in the *Gītā* that produce a state of at-one-ment. Drawing from his training with the Jesuits and to confirm the experience of unity in depth and accessible to the human

species, he wrote *Powers of Imagining: A Philosophical Hermeneutic of Imagining through Ignatius de Loyola* (1986).

Additionally, two fields beyond philosophy and religion called to de Nicolás: education and musicology. His Philosophy of Education course at Stony Brook was required of all students training to be teachers. From this class arose *Habits of Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (1989), which emphasizes the centrality of affect in human development and decision making, arguing persuasively that we learn through feeling earlier, and more deeply, than through the intellect.

A lover of music and its effects on the human spirit, he entered into a dialogue with renowned musicologist Ernest McClain. McClain delved deeply into the musical tuning systems that characterize each of Plato's Republics. De Nicolás explained to McClain the underlying musical structures of the *R̥g Veda*. They celebrated the open tuning systems of the ancient world, which contrast with the more narrow sound of equal temperament. The natural generation of tones results in an upward spiral toward a new octave which "misses" its mark by the square root of two. The tones in post-Cartesian scientific approaches to music require the flattening and sharpening of notes so that they may be mathematically managed. Traditional music worldwide allows for an open ascent and descent of scales accommodating this anomaly. The western orchestral and choral traditions, governed by the justified scale or equal temperament, covers over and ignores this so-called imperfection. "Tuning" a piano, as demonstrated by McClain on his monochord, actually entails warping nature to conform to a non-existent symmetry.

De Nicolás, a lover of language, also became a poet and a translator of poetry. His auto-biographical epic poem, *Moksha Smith: Agni's Warrior-Sage, an Epic of the Immortal Fire* (2001), chronicles world travel and multiple discoveries. His translations of St. John of the Cross and Juan Ramon Jimenez deliver with poignancy the yearning for meaning inherent in the human condition. His dozens of articles often combine insight and poetry, always with an eye on understanding and improving self and circumstance through right decisions.

As a philosopher, de Nicolás explored various contents and methodologies. His doctoral dissertation probed the insights of modern science, including Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the concept of complementarity. De Nicolás explained the multiplicity of Hindu gods and goddesses by viewing them not in competition with one

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another but complimentary to one another as manifestations of the ONE. Myriad religious and psychological truths arise and can be viewed as complementary, not unlike photons which can be measured both as waves and as particles in the methodology of modern physics. His grasp of continental thought was wide-ranging, particularly in his appreciation and articulation of the central role played by hermeneutics. He was an apt critic of reductionist thinking, always willing to peel back layers of interpretation in pursuit of often elusive truths.

This book includes essays in honor of Antonio de Nicolás drawn from various areas of his interest, demonstrating that his work percolated through multiple communities. It begins with a personal reflection by Aurora Ilárrraz. The essay pays tribute to Ilárrraz and Antonio's friendship, which has endured since the trying times of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. Following Ilárrraz, Gerald Turchetto writes about his time with de Nicolás in a personal essay reflecting his experiences with de Nicolás as a student, assistant, and, later, as a teacher himself.

The book continues with a musical homage to Antonio that requires the use of the internet to listen and hence participate in the compositions of Kenneth Amis with lyrics by de Nicolás: www.KennethAmis.com. Following the listening component, Ernest McClain then shares his important musical collaboration with de Nicolás. Musician and artist Jung Hee Choi discusses the concept of vibrational systems embraced as the basis of all substance in ancient cultures and in the musical philosophy delineated by de Nicolás and McClain in their long collaboration, bringing us forward and full circle through the contemporary understanding and scientific discoveries of sound as a model of universal structure back to its postulation in antiquity. Thomas Affatigato, a musician and astronomer who studied with both de Nicolás and McClain in the 1970s and 1980s, provides a summary of how the Vedic methodology of the former can help elucidate the work of the latter. Gerald Turchetto, philosopher and former student of Antonio de Nicolas, provides a hermeneutic that analyzes consciousness in the *Yoga Sūtra* with musical and philosophical concepts.

Five chapters with philosophical content follow. The first, by Anthony Judge, provides a synoptic interpretation of the fourfold Vedic "languaging" of the world. The second, by Geoff Ashton, reads de Nicolás' interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* in light of Ricoeur's exploration of identity, noting the more expansive possibilities carried within the Hindu dynamics of karma, dharma, and *mokṣa* (liberation). The third chapter, by

Sunthar Visuvalingam, discusses the role of transgressive sacrality in the Hindu faith as critically important for the process of inter-religious dialogue. The next two chapters of the book put some of the core ideas raised by de Nicolás in dialogue with modern philosophy and psychology, particularly as instigated by Nietzsche. Babette Babich explores the concept of the immediacy of experience and Christopher Key Chapple takes up the issue of human will.

The next four chapters, written by educators, demonstrate the effect of de Nicolás' work on the teaching profession in two contexts. The first two chapters explore the implications of the approach taken by de Nicolás in his work with training teachers. Carl Colavito provides a measured analysis of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, criticizing the reduction of human learning to measurable outcomes. Rex Emerick discusses the hegemony of management in its attempt to replace creative imagination in our educational systems. The next two chapters reflect on the work of two non-conventional educators of Indian origin on Long Island who inspired many of de Nicolás's thousands of students at Stony Brook, Gurāṇi Añjali in Amityville and Sri Chinmoy in Queens. Both were of Bengali origin and had been influenced by Sri Aurobindo. They gathered many young followers to their respective meditation centers. Maureen Shannon-Chapple provides a narrative history of traditional education in India and, with Christopher Chapple, describes how Gurāṇi Añjali replicated the traditional Ashram model on Long Island, where many of de Nicolás's students received training in Yoga philosophy and practice alongside their university education. Kusumita Pedersen's chapter describes the poetry of Sri Chinmoy who, like de Nicolás, emphasized the importance of human heartedness.

In addition to teaching for the departments of philosophy and education, de Nicolás' classes were an integral part of the major in comparative literature. His work as a linguist and translator proved invaluable to students in this discipline. His method of approaching texts anticipated much of the critical theory that has now come to characterize literary studies.

Reece Thomas Harris weaves a wonderful essay drawing upon Gilgamesh, John of the Cross, and Plato to suggest that much of the poetic can be learned from strangers in our midst. For the past few years, de Nicolás has been engaged in a new project translating Homer's *Odyssey*. His collaborator, Constantine Santas, describes their working relationship and the technical aspects of decisions made when translating

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poetry from one linguistic context to another. The last chapter is penned by Maria Colavito, now wife of Antonio. The essay calls upon the mystical poetry of de Nicolás to evoke the deep emotionality, insight, and wisdom of a life well lived.

As an appendix, several tributes to the work of Antonio de Nicolás are included. The first, by philosopher-physicist Raimundo Panikkar (1918–2010), introduces de Nicolás's book *Avatāra: The Humanization of Philosophy through the Bhagavad Gītā*. The second, by Pulitzer Prize winning poet and Stony Brook colleague Louis Simpson (1923–2012), introduces de Nicolás' translation of Nobel Prize winner Juan Ramon Jimenez's book *God Desired and Desiring*. The third piece, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, is the foreword to *Alchemy of the Soul*, a translation of works by St. John of the Cross by de Nicolás. The fourth piece, by Juan Masia Clavel, S.J., in Spanish, is about Plato's divided line and the myth of the cave. The fifth piece, by William Packard (1933–2002), consists of an interview with de Nicolás published in the *New York Quarterly*.

Hunter Joslin, while earning his M.A. in Comparative Theology at Loyola Marymount University, devoted long hours to the editing and production process of this *festschrift*. To him we are deeply grateful.

The *festschrift* has been compiled in recognition of a great mind, a lover of life, a lover of philosophy, a lover of poetry and music, a lover of the unity of human kind. Many have been inspired by the life and work of Antonio de Nicolás; this book gives testimony to the vast reach of his explorations and journeys.

Christopher Key Chapple

Los Angeles, California

October 2013

Antonio T. de Nicolás

Poet of Eternal Return



'I used to spend long hours in a solitary chapel at the time of day when the Indian landscape was most drenched with sun and human silence. I was always alone there, at that time of day. It was perhaps the total human silence at that time of the day that made that voice sound so loud and clear: "Too distant to be God; not close enough to be human" it said in English, when my mother tongue was still Spanish. The voice seemed to come from the tabernacle, and mysteriously my body seemed also to be there.'

-**de Nicolás**, from an interview with William Packard, Founder of the *New York Quarterly*

"A Spaniard who was born and nurtured in the cultural universe of St. John of the Cross, de Nicolás journeyed beyond the Catholic world to delve deeply into the metaphysical teachings of Hinduism. He mastered Sanskrit and became first known in America for his translations and commentaries of Hindu sacred texts. He himself is a poet as well as a philosopher in the traditional and normal sense of the term."

-**Seyyed Hossein Nasr**, Professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University

THE NIGHT ALBATROSS

Antonio T. de Nicolás

On this shore of Long Island
I need to know the child I was
on that other shore
of the Castillian plains.
At night I let my soul
fly back and forth across the sea,
night albatross of memory,
to find out why I have lived.
Is this the life the child wanted
when he became a man?

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