

time, a trap: a different world that was not merely suspect, but was long since well on the way to taking possession of their own.

Without a doubt, the Hispanoamerican intellectual who was essential to this concept was the Cuban José Martí, who through his unceasing activity while in US American exile first unleashed that war in 1895 in which the US, fully conscious of its power, would then intervene so successfully. From today's point of view, one may consider it given that the earliest theorist of the third phase of accelerated globalization was undoubtedly José Martí, yet the greater portion of his work responds to the challenges of this exceedingly turbulent phase of history with an answer that is equally decisive and determined. But who was this thinker, revered even today in Latin America, yet still generally unknown in Europe?

The Abundance of Absence

Perhaps the best, if not the simplest answer to this question was given to us by a writer who is certainly one of the greatest of the 20th century. At the end of the third of five lectures that he held between the 16th and 26th of January, 1957, in the *Centro de Altos Estudios* at the *Instituto Nacional de Cultura* in Havana, José Lezama Lima attempted to place the figure of José Martí into the light of a tradition of absence:

But this great romantic tradition of the 19th century, that of the dungeon, of absence, of the picture, and of death, succeeds in creating the American fact, the fate of which consists more of possible absences than of impossible presences. The tradition of possible absences has been the great American tradition in which resides the historical fact that has been attained. José Martí represents, in a great verbal Christmas, the abundance of possible absence. In him are culminated the dungeon of Fray Servando, the frustration of Simón Rodríguez, the death of Francisco Miranda, but also the lightning of the seven intuitions of Chinese culture, which allow him through the metaphor of knowledge to quiet and create that vortex that destroys him; that mystery that freezes neither the flight of the great losers nor the oscillation between two great destinies, and which he solves by uniting himself with the house that has been set afire. We must emplace his death within the Incan Pachacán of the invisible god.¹⁶

With these considerations, which he developed just a few days before the 104th birthday of José Martí and published under the title "Romanticism and the American Fact" as the central essay of *La expresión americana*, José Lezama Lima,

¹⁶ José Lezama Lima: *La expresión americana*, p. 115 f.

undoubtedly the leading figure of 20th century Cuban literature, did more than just insert the author of the *Simple Verses* and founder of the Cuban Revolutionary Party (PRC) into an “American” tradition. For in this passage it becomes apparent—at least from the perspective of Lezama Lima—that that which is American in José Martí cannot be nourished only on the Hispanoamerican tradition of the 19th century, but also, in a fundamental way, must on the one hand be linked to the American cultures of pre-Columbian lineage, and on the other, must be projected into the global dimensions of a comprehensive world culture. For José Lezama Lima, to wish to understand Cuba without its globe-spanning, transareal dimensions would have been from the beginning an absurd undertaking, doomed to lamentable failure. Like no other writer, like no other thinker, José Martí represents this dimension of the transareal, the transcultural, in his writings and in his actions.

Beyond the three great representatives of Spanish America’s struggle for independence, and beyond the Incan tradition likewise invoked here, José Lezama Lima, the founder and head of the magazine *Orígenes*, consequently enrolls the founding figure of Hispanoamerican *Modernismo*, José Martí, into a dimension that is in the truest sense universal and which, with the introduction of Chinese culture, for instance, can represent the envisioned “abundance of possible absence.” But what is to be understood from this expression, so characteristic of Lezama Lima’s writing? And what constitutes this great American tradition of “possible absences,” of *ausencias posibles*, with respect to Martí, the indisputably dominant figure of both Cuban literature and Cuban history of the 19th century?

It is not only highly significant in terms of reception history that Lezama Lima, in the concluding passage of his lecture, puts Martí’s journals, the *Diarios* of the last weeks and days of the *autor intelectual* of the 1895 war against the Spanish colonial power, into the center of both his argument and his very personal search for José Martí. For indeed, the 50’s of the 20th century are years of bitter political struggle for the claim to the ideological legacy of José Martí in Cuba: without exception, all political parties and movements invoke the figure, the icon, of the long-since sacralized “Apostle” of Cuban history. The impressive Martí cult culminates in a gigantic Martí monument that since 1959 has served Fidel Castro as the setting for the great speeches of the Cuban Revolution at Revolution Plaza, but which—and this circumstance preferably remains hidden—was erected toward the end of the previous dictatorship of Fulgencio Ba-

tista.¹⁷ Before a backdrop not only of sharp contentions and heated debates, but of military repression and guerilla attacks, Lezama's evidence initiates with respect to the poeticity of Martí's journals a completely new point of view that does not attempt to hitch Martí's thought and writings to any ideological wagons. He is concerned with winning back Martí's thought and writing, and not with functionalizing it for the power-instincts of past or future dictators. Lezama's speech on the abundance of absence draws attention to the pitfall of forced presence to which the figure of José Martí had been instrumentally delivered since the beginning of the 20th century.

While the fighters against the Batista dictatorship, in association with the acclaimed 1953 centenary celebration of José Martí's birth, invoke Martí as the "intellectual author" of their revolutionary thought and actions, and the great Cuban intellectuals are soon to transform him into the icon of a revolution that will functionalize Martí in the following decades in various ways for the changing goals and objectives of Cuban power politics, Lezama Lima harks back to those modes of expression in Martí's writing in which forms the vortex, the hurricane that was created to take everything and sweep it away. Lezama points out with care the creative force of this *remolino*, the crucial significance of "poetic awareness" (*conocimiento poético*),¹⁸ and the relevance of "poetry as a prelude to a siege of the city",¹⁹ with which the author of *Enemigo rumor* undoubtedly knew himself to be very closely connected. Poetic awareness thus generates, through the power and tradition of literature, a knowledge that is everlasting and, at the same time, in constant oscillating motion. This knowledge of literature may be understood, but may not be reduced to a *single* understanding. For Lezama Lima, José Martí still speaks in his last writings, in his war journals, for this awareness, for this cognition.

Thus, at the end of the centerpiece of *La expresión americana*, the abundance of Martí's writings appears, and with it, the abundance of that which is American, just in that complexly interwoven moment when José Martí, as a fighter against Spanish colonialism in 1895, ends his decades-long absence from Cuba and at the same time, finds his end—and the end of his writing—in the Cuban *Oriente*, struck by a Spanish bullet. In the midst of the bloody fighting between Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship, which was still invoking Martí, and the variously-oriented revolutionary forces, José Lezama Lima focuses on just these last

¹⁷ On reception history, see Ottmar Ette: *José Martí. Teil I: Apostel—Dichter—Revolutionär. Eine Geschichte seiner Rezeption*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 1991.

¹⁸ José Lezama Lima: *La expresión americana*, p. 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

pages of the journals (*Diarios*) seemingly rooted in the sensory experience of Cuba, so as to construct from Martí's last Cuban experience immediately before his death the abundance of a fearful, yet fruitful absence. He examines here the last notes that the poet and revolutionary Martí committed to his journal just a few hours before his death:

The closing words of his two journals remind us of the arrangements which, according to the *Book of the Dead*, must be made with a view to the subterranean place of residence. He asks for books, he asks for pots of fig leaves. He offers provisions "with a stone in the drinks of the newcomers." The valley seems to adorn its ravines for the newcomer, who begins again to recognize things and call them by name, to orient himself in irreality, in accordance with the Orphic cult, to the heaviness of bread, the equilibrium of the milk bowl, the barking of the dog. His *Journals* are the tactile discovery of one who has walked the land, of the newcomer, the semi-conscious one, the emergent one. He presides over two great moments of the American expression. Over the one that creates a fact through the mirror of the image. And over the one that, in the Mexican romance, in the wide guitar of Martín Fierro, in the theological whale, and in the Whitman Body creates the altar for the star that announces the nascent act.²⁰

Here there is no room for the short-term and short-sighted political instrumentalization of Martí. Seldom in so few lines, in "a dense weave of allusions and connections,"²¹ has such an abundance of varying cultural filiations and traditions been connected to one another as on this closing page of "El romanticismo y el hecho americano." In the carefully selected quotes and motifs from the journals there appears in the Cuban *Oriente* not only the Spanish literature of the *Siglo de Oro* or the American popular culture around the Río de la Plata, nor only the Cuban lyric poetry of Romanticism or the carnality of the anglo-American poetic art of a Walt Whitman, but above all the presence of the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Orphic cult, which in their pendulum motion, in their *oscilación*, mediate between the Realm of the Dead and the Realm of the Living and project into the death of the living the life of the dead—and with it, the omnipresence of absence—in the form of *poetic knowing*, of poetic awareness (*conocimiento poético*).²² José Martí is stylized here into a human and, at the same time, superhuman figure of the transculturally American, in the gestures and motions of

²⁰ Ibid. p. 116 f.

²¹ Sergio Ugalde Quintana: *La biblioteca en la isla: para una lectura de "La expresión americana" de José Lezama Lima*. Doctoral dissertation defended at the Colegio de México, Mexico City D.F. 2006, p. 249.

²² José Lezama Lima: *La expresión americana*, p. 116.

which the paths of the world's cultures intersect, transhistorically as it were, and are connected to something new and unprecedented.

The figure of José Martí, in its oscillation, in its Orphic-creative pendulum swing between the Realm of the Living and the Realm of the Dead, between preparation for death and transfiguration in life, is transformed by the vortex of this poetic awareness, set in motion by José Lezama Lima, into a (very Cuban) culmination point of that which is American, and of the *expresión americana*. But it is not exactly because of its restriction to the Cuban and thus to the (proto) national of the *patria chica* that Martí's work is American, nor to the Hispanoamerican and thus to the supranational of the *patria grande*, nor to the continental and thus to the hemispherical of a topographical-geographical spatial construction.²³ What then is that American expression that would come to provide the title for this volume of essays by Lezama Lima?

Poetic knowledge, poetic awareness in Lezama's sense, does not aim toward an essentializing of that which is American, but at the relationality that connects its different *Areas* to one another, and thereby toward a poetics of movement: what counts is not the space, but the crossing of it, not the static presence, but the continuous dynamic creation of new possible paths. Only then is it possible to release the abundance of the possible from out of the absences, in continually new ways, while avoiding the trap of a reduction to the present.

This interplay of plenty and pitfall however means this: the future is not connected back to a single affiliation, a single lineage, a single identity marker. It results, should one escape the breathless cycles of political discourse, from the visions of a transareal network, from the multilogic of connections that cannot be regimented by a single set of standards. The abundance of the imaginable, the thinkable, the livable, is not to be restricted to what is materially at hand. This knowledge of literature is also a knowledge that is capable of transforming the comprehension of a country and its territory or territories. Such an understanding of Martí and Cuba, developing from transfer to transformation, is however the goal of Lezama Lima, surely the greatest Cuban writer of the 20th century.

The following considerations therefore agree completely with the assessment that one may recognize in Martí "the key to Cuba, the key to our America

²³ On this fundamental problem of Hispanoamerican literature, see Adalbert Dessau: "Das Internationale, das Kontinentale und das Nationale in der lateinamerikanischen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts." In: *Lateinamerika* (Rostock) (Spring Semester 1978), pp. 43–87; and also Ottmar Ette: "Asymmetrie der Beziehungen. Zehn Thesen zum Dialog der Literaturen Lateinamerikas und Europas." In: Scharlau, Birgit (ed.): *Lateinamerika denken*, pp. 297–326.

(*nuestra América*).²⁴ But any sort of attempt at identifying the humanism apparent in the thought and deeds of José Martí with the goals of Marxism and a Cuban “*revolución socialista*”²⁵ which up to the present day *exclusively* lays claim to the figure of the great revolutionary must confront the texts, the writings of the author of *Nuestra América*. Beyond the ideological graveside squabbling still being carried on over the legacy of José Martí, a careful analysis of his various writings and of his ideas will not allow themselves “to be appropriated as the current circumstances of the great Bolivarian fatherland, of which Martí dreamed.”²⁶

The considerations to follow are clearly much more committed to the goal of articulating, from a transareal perspective, the topicality of Martí’s thought and writings, beyond all political-ideological updating, from the polysemous praxis of the poetic knowledge that Martí developed in his writings, which are still fascinating today. This is not a matter of a detached, esoteric knowledge: it is not without reason that the great Cuban writer may well be considered the most profound thinker contemporary to the third phase of accelerated globalization. This power to fascinate is also discernible in the specifically American dimension of that which we may call Martí’s humanism. For he focuses on the forms and norms of living together—on the national, continental, and global scales equally.

It is no surprise that all of Martí’s accomplishments, all his unrelenting activities, appear as incessant motion, as a vortex (*remolino*) and a pendulum swing (*oscilación*). It is clear that the author of *La expresión americana* in his open delineation of what is American is registering himself as part of that line of tradition that may later be traced onward from Alfonso Reyes to Jorge Luis Borges,²⁷ but which before this features substantial reference points in the Hispanoamerican *Modernismo* of such figures as Rubén Darío, José Enrique Rodó, and, of course, José Martí—and thus in the intermediate realm between literature and

²⁴ Enrique Ubieta Gómez: “Prológo.” In: Pablo Guadarrama González: *José Martí y el humanismo en América Latina*. Bogotá: Convenio Andrés Bello 2003, p. 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Pablo Guadarrama González: *José Martí y el humanismo en América Latina*, p. 9. The museum dedicated to Martí in the heart of Caracas impressively illustrates the claim of a direct ideological line that extends from Simón Bolívar, through José Martí (devised in the iconography of Lenin), to Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. There appears to be no end in sight to the ideological functionalizing and updating of Martí.

²⁷ C.f. Sergio Ugalde Quintana: *La biblioteca en la isla*, p. 280 f.; also, Amelia Barili: *Jorge Luis Borges y Alfonso Reyes: la cuestión de la identidad del escritor latinoamericano*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica 1999, pp. 144–166.

philosophy that is so characteristic of Latin America. For the history of philosophy in Latin America is unthinkable without literature.

In his still widely discussed essay from 1942, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition,” Jorge Luis Borges had introduced in a most convincing way the seemingly paradoxical (at first glance) programmatic insight that the actual tradition of the Argentine writer cannot be restricted just to what is Argentine:

Which is the Argentine tradition? I believe we can easily answer this question, and that it offers no sort of problem. I believe that our tradition is the entirety of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition that is greater than the right held by the inhabitants of one nation or another in the West.²⁸

And after the Argentine writer had substantiated the specific creativity of Jewish writers within the Western culture and Irish writers in the English culture through pointing out the specific feeling of their own otherness, he self-assuredly and world-consciously added:

I believe that we Argentines, we South Americans in general, find ourselves in an analogous situation; we successfully deal with all European topics, and we deal with them without superstition and with an irreverence that can and indeed already does yield happy results.²⁹

To be Argentine, then, one must not allow himself to be reduced to that which is stereotypically and in a clichéd manner considered as Argentine, or to that which generally counts as “typically Argentine.” And subtly, Borges pointed out that even in the Arabic book *par excellence*, the Koran, there are of course no camels: this absence of camels illustrates more than any other thing that this is, in fact, an Arabic work. An Arabic forger, a tourist or a nationalist on the other hand, would have taken care first and foremost that the book would be swarming with camels: “caravans of camels on every page.”³⁰ Therefore, one can be Argentine specifically by not—or at least not primarily or exclusively—worrying about local color, but instead by placing the presence of absences—as we, with Lezama, might put it—at the center. Here lies that abundance that feeds upon “possible absences,” the *ausencias posibles*.³¹

²⁸ Jorge Luis Borges: “El escritor argentino y la tradición.” In: Jorge Luis Borges: *Obras completas: 1923–1972*, vol. I. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores 1987, p. 272.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 273

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 270.

³¹ José Lezama Lima: *La expresión americana*, p. 115.

While Borges, in 1942, establishes from the perspective of the Argentine writer a connection to western culture that is shaped by a creative interplay between intrinsicality and extrinsicality, by internal and external relationality, and which is clearly superior to an understanding of the occidental that is based only upon an interior viewpoint, Lezama Lima, in 1957, develops the question of that which is American, of the *expresión americana*, in such a manner that in the writings of the Cuban José Martí a cultural space becomes apparent that is American specifically because it does not restrict itself to the American in its national, supranational, or continental form. Rather, it establishes a specifically *transareal* multiplicity of connections to the cultures of the world: not in a comparative and correlative sense, but in one that is insistent and penetrative.

In Lezama as well, a specific interplay of intrinsicality and extrinsicality appears, the fate of which is clearly influenced more by possible absences than by impossible presences (*presencias imposibles*³²). In this oscillating motion of the American writer between intrinsicality and extrinsicality, between internal and external relationality, between presence and absence, the extent to which there opens up the possibility of developing (from the criticism of a modernity that is European or shaped by Europe) a new humanism, the abundance of which is characterized by a presence of absence, will be illuminated more closely in the following pages, with an eye to what is certainly José Martí's most famous essay, *Nuestra América*.

The Plenty and Pitfall of Globalization

The José Martí text that remains even today his most influential first appeared in *La Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York* on the first of January, 1891. It is characterized, given the selected point in time for publication, by the same gesture of being placed at the beginning of a new cycle with which one of the other great Hispanoamerican Modernists put forth his equally brief and no less influential text. For it was quite consciously that the Uruguayan essayist José Enrique Rodó, a short decade later, arranged for his cultural-philosophical text *Ariel* to appear at the beginning of the year 1900, and thus not only at the start of a new year, but of a new century.³³

³² Ibid. p. 115.

³³ C.f. the German language edition of José Enrique Rodó: *Ariel*. Translated, edited, and annotated by Ottmar Ette. Mainz: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuch-handlung 1994.