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Inscribing the Paradigm: On Senel Paz's "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo"

There is a story in Senel Paz's 1980 collection of stories, *El niño aquel*, in which a meal in a well-to-do household constitutes the narrative mechanism for an acerbic denunciation of class inequalities. This story, "Almuerzo," appears about ten years before the now much better-known "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo," another Paz story featuring a class-defining meal. In the later story, the fictional character Diego re-enacts *Paradiso's* scene of the lavish "almuerzo lezamiano," reciting passages from Chapter VII of Lezama Lima's novel and serving the dishes precisely as described – in exquisite detail – in those pages. In spite of numerous and obvious differences between the earlier and the later scenes of meals, in each the meal is a signifier of privilege, and, specifically, the privilege of a pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie. It is significant, then, that these scenes constitute the vehicle, in these stories, for such different and ultimately incompatible ideologies.

In "Almuerzo" we have a straightforward indictment of pre-revolutionary class structure and a snapshot of a particularly callous member of that class. After school one day a boy visits his mother in the house where she works as a maid. The lady of the house asks him to play the part of a hungry dog in order to incite her petulant three-year-old to eat his own meal. The ruse fails. The three-year-old refuses to eat – even when his mother threatens to give his food to the agitated boy-dog – and, his performance unsuccessful, the child protagonist is dismissed without a bite. In "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo," in contrast, we have an homage to the *cultura criolla* whose signifiers of privilege had been anathema ten years earlier, an homage to a culture that no is no longer imagined lording it over the masses, in fact, but that now represents a subaltern culture that has managed to survive the Revolution's efforts to eradicate it.

For various reasons, the later story probably could not have been published in Cuba in 1980. It is probably also true, however, that "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo" would have been difficult if not impossible even to *imagine* ten years earlier. It is not that any intervening historical events are represented in the later narrative. There are no *data* in the text of "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo" that were unavailable ten years earlier. But it would have

been virtually inconceivable, in 1980, that the *guajiro humilde* at the center of the story might be initiated, by means of the homosexual Diego's literary-culinary ritual, into "la cofradía de los adoradores del Maestro" – where "Maestro" refers to José Lezama Lima, the gay *origenista* author of the novel to which Diego pays homage (44). It would have been particularly difficult to construe such an initiation as a step forward for the Revolution, particularly if Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's response to the Néstor Almendros 1984 documentary film *Mauvaise conduite* is any indication of the climate of reception in those years.¹

In the years that separate the two Paz stories something *has* happened, of course; historical events and developments combine to make the story *possible*: the institutional rehabilitation of Lezama Lima and the *origenistas* in Cuba during the 1980s; the growing momentum, in these same years, of the gay rights movement around the globe; and, of course, the decline of the Soviet Union and the demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989. These ideological and material developments contribute to the broad paradigm shift in Cuban culture and political ideology that enables Orígenes to "go mainstream" in the 1990s. These developments bring about the conditions in which "El lobo, el bosque, y el hombre nuevo" can be published in a Cuban journal, first, and then again as a novella in Mexico, where it enjoyed numerous reprintings in the 1990s. The gravitational pull of the intervening developments – unrepresented though they are – is unmistakable in "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo."

I begin this discussion with the striking contrast between two stories by Senel Paz, however, not simply to underline the evident transformation of the Cuban author, the national literary economy, and the post-Soviet readership, but in order to sketch the contours of an accompanying literary-critical difficulty. Such a dramatic and self-evident shift, in the work of a single author, from relatively straightforward socialist apology and critique of the former ruling class to the enshrinement of an almost aristocratic *cultura criolla* poses something of a dilemma, I submit, for the literary critic who has identified with the socialist, egalitarian ethos of the Cuban Revolution – regardless of what he or she thinks of the Revolution's concrete example – and for whom Marxian categories of analysis are indispensable.

For it is the later story, "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo," that in "mystifying" the creative genius of Lezama Lima and reifying a *je ne sais quoi* of a Cuban *cultura criolla*, best lends itself to a Marxist hermeneutic. There is work to do here, in other words, that "Almuerzo" did not appear to require. A materialist reading of the earlier story risks paraphrasing its

¹ See Paul Julian Smith's account (1996) of Gutiérrez Alea's response to *Mauvaise conduite* (82).

straightforward critique of pre-revolutionary class structure. While the later story would appear to invite a materialist reading, however, it also heralds Cuban literature's supersession precisely of this earlier, too-obvious literature of socialist apology, on the one hand, and declares "real" literature's irreducibility to crude Marxian analytical categories, on the other. Bruno, the character of the Party *militante* in "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre Nuevo," is a caricature of *machismo* and institutional dogma who will never understand what the narrator learns in the course of the story, who is insensible to the sort of intellectual, sentimental education that David has undergone at the hands of Diego, the now vindicated "culture queen" (Quiroga, "Homosexualities (1997: 143)).

The shift in the balance of power from the Party to the individual aesthete or the individual *auteur* in this story – and indeed, from "totalizing narratives" to the more "local" gay rights movement – mirrored a broader shift in Cuban studies. Critical discussions of socioeconomic class, global capitalism and US economic and cultural imperialism became difficult to sustain in Cuban cultural studies and literary fiction alike, even as the United States government intensified its blockade of the island in the 1990s, passing the Torricelli Act and the Helms–Burton Act, which were calculated to deliver the *coup de grâce* to the ailing socialist regime. For the literary critic in this field to speak of US imperialism, for example, or of the relation between capitalism and imperialism, has been to risk appearing to parrot the language of the regime.

To be sure, Cuba's position in the geopolitical sphere is not the greatest problem in "El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo" but rather state institutions themselves. As Diego puts it to David, "los yanquis no, pero la gastronomía, la burocracia, el tipo de propaganda que ustedes hacen y la soberbia, pueden acabar con esto" (57). A materialist and unapologetically leftist literary criticism of this particular narrative, then, may appear complicit with the authoritarian discourse the story rejects. The story's sole intellectual and literary aesthete has lost his job in the cultural bureaucracy for which dialectical materialism is crude institutional instrument – a kind of intellectual club – and he is blacklisted for any further work in this sphere. Hence the apparently paradoxical position of the literary critic who approaches this story convinced of the reality of class exploitation, of capitalist imperialism, and who sees that the US Cold War policy towards Cuba not only persists after the demolition of the Berlin Wall but intensifies. Marxian modes of analysis are needed here most urgently precisely at their moment of lowest prestige in Cuban studies.

Returning to these analytic practices may be somewhat easier now that a global economic crisis has dampened the neoliberal euphoria and undermined the Washington Consensus that prevailed after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. That is, the ideology that was bolstered when historical

events presumably gave the lie to socialism finds itself on its knees. Some of the basic assumptions of materialist, anti-imperialist cultural discourse might be revived now then, just as such assumptions were discredited or rendered *passé* twenty years earlier. It is not that the economic crisis that took shape in the final years of the Bush II administration made imperial ambition particularly more visible – it was perfectly visible all along, of course. It is just that the quixotic nature of the enterprise came much more clearly into focus. The current crisis provides a good vantage, then, for reassessing the cultural narrative that emerged in Cuba in the 1990s, a narrative in which Orígenes became a kind of emblem of authentic, autonomous Cuban art even as it circulated – indeed, proliferated – according to the needs of the trans-Atlantic culture industry. A narrative that cried out for materialist analysis all along may stand a chance, it seems to me, of becoming the object of a sustained and committed cultural and literary criticism on the political left.

“El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo” is a good place to test the hypothesis because it lays out the blueprint for a literary narrative that will gain currency in the 1990s. In this narrative paradigm, a young, white male protagonist – who happens to be the historical or fictional author of the narrative in which he appears – aspires to become a great writer. These texts tell the story, in other words, of their own intellectual and artistic gestation. The author contends, in the stage of the literary project he narrates, with the legal, social and ideological obstacles that the state puts in his way. In “El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo” – just as in Jesús Díaz’s *Las palabras perdidas*; in Eliseo Alberto’s *Informe contra mí mismo*; in Leonardo Padura’s *Máscaras*; and in Antonio José Ponte’s *El libro perdido de los origenistas* – the writer-protagonist manages, under the spiritual and literary tutelage of the *origenistas*, their texts, or their fictional surrogates, to overcome both personal crises and state interference.

Of course, this narrative is necessary and meaningful in the 1990s. The Cuban writer certainly had been “parametrized” by the state, particularly in the 1970s. There are no grounds whatever for questioning the choice of various Cuban writers to reassert the freedom of the individual literary imagination and to vindicate a suppressed literary history in the 1990s, when the debilitation of the state’s cultural institutions and access to a foreign literary industry made it possible for them to do so. The aim of this study, once again, is not to debunk the emerging narrative of literary liberation but to contextualize it, to examine its conditions of possibility, and to make a contribution to the work of outlining both its limitations and its possibilities.

I am particularly interested in the iconic role of Orígenes in this cultural narrative for two basic reasons. First, the narrative vindication of Orígenes in the 1990s and the rejection of the state-identified literature of revolutionary romanticism (more commonly referred to as socialist realism) occurs in texts that appear to have a great deal more in common, structurally and stylisti-

cally, with the literature they reject than with the literature they admire. As narrative literature “El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo” clearly has more in common with the earlier “Almuerzo” and with the other stories in *El niño aquel* than it does with the novel *Paradiso* that its main characters venerate – in spite of Senel Paz’s evident change of direction, ideologically, from his earlier stories. By the same token, Jesús Díaz’s *Las palabras perdidas* has a great deal more in common with his earlier *Los años duros* than it does with the work of those literary giants the narrative represents – Lezama Lima, Eliseo Diego, Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén.

I am not suggesting, of course, that it should be otherwise – that writers should realize radical structural and stylistic changes in their narratives to correspond with their own decisive ideological shifts and with the recanonization of Orígenes, or that their writing should exhibit the core literary sensibilities of the authors they admire. On the contrary, I intend to suggest that breaking decisively and cleanly with the intellectual and artistic legacy of the Revolution and resuming the pre-revolutionary “natural literary process” (as one critic put it) is never even really an option – even when the Revolution appears to be on its last legs. A politically committed literature with realist pretensions like Senel Paz’s story “Almuerzo” does not simply step aside to make way for the return of a more autonomous, hermetic literature that resumes the mid-century dialogue with modernists like Joyce or Proust.

In spite of its obvious break with the earlier story’s mode of critique and its paean to Lezama Lima’s *Paradiso*, “El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo” adheres to an essentially realist representation of a contemporary Cuba shaped materially and ideologically by the country’s socialist revolution. The triumphal return of Orígenes to the lettered city from which it was expelled – or in which it was silenced – does not result, in the Paz story, in a revival of earlier literary praxes. What obtains, rather, in the Paz story and in the other texts I examine, is an admixture of elements of the recently hegemonic revolutionary romanticism that is now presumably left behind, on one hand, and of certain literary concerns associated with the pre-revolutionary literature that is now presumably recuperated, on the other.

The second reason that I am interested in the Orígenes literary iconography – as elaborated in the 1990s in the literature itself and the criticism written about it – is that it appears to coexist more or less unproblematically with the post-Soviet world order. Orígenes circulates in Cuban literary narratives that have managed to escape the grip of an authoritarian state, but the fictionalized Orígenes does so according to the rules of a trans-Atlantic literary economy to which Orígenes itself never had access, and which the *origenistas* themselves despised. The *origenistas* may never have been the proto-revolutionaries that Cintio Vitier has claimed that they were, but they were nevertheless adamant in their rejection of the mass culture of consumer

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