

## Introduction

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### I

Despite being one of the most influential Latin American writers of the twentieth century, José Lezama Lima's (1910-1976) work has had limited translations into English. His novel *Paradiso* was the first of his texts that appeared in English when in 1974 Farrar, Straus and Giroux published it. This translation coincided with the great reception that the Latin American Boom writers had in North American culture and the academy during this period. Even though Lezama Lima is not, strictly speaking, a member of what the publishing industry came to call the "Boom generation", his novel *Paradiso*, published in 1966, was contemporaneous with other novels that marked an important milestone in Latin American narrative: *La ciudad y los perros* (1963) by Mario Vargas Llosa (*Time of the Hero*, 1966), *Rayuela* (1963) by Julio Cortázar (*Hopscotch*, 1967), *Cien años de Soledad* (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1970), etc. It was the narrative innovation associated with the Boom, a general interest in

Latin America and the Cuban Revolution, and the Latin American Neo-Baroque that marked the reception of Lezama Lima's first translation to English<sup>1</sup>. However, *Paradiso* is different from all the other Boom novels in each one of the above categories<sup>2</sup>.

Unlike the other authors cited here, Lezama is, first and foremost, a poet. In some notes for a lecture about his novel *Paradiso* that he never actually delivered, Lezama writes about the relationship that exists in his work between the novel and poetry, poetry and prose:

Poetry and the novel have the same root. The world made sense and simultaneously resisted interpretation like an immense poem...A phrase of mine that I have repeated: when my thoughts are obscure I write poetry; when I am more lucid I write prose. That apparent dichotomy got resolved in a unified manner in my novel. I thought it was clear because in it are my family, my mother, my grandmother, my circumstances; those things that are closest to me, the

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<sup>1</sup> The reader reception that the novel had in the English-speaking world was varied and not always enthusiastic. One of these emblematic readings because of its emphatic rejection of the novel is Michael Wood's review that appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, April 18, 1974 under the ironic title of "Purgatory". Lezama, who was always very attentive to reader responses to his work outside of Cuba made the following comment to his sister Eloísa in a letter dated October 1974: "I read the somber critique written by Wood in *The New York Review*. It is a dogmatic critique that we know where it comes from. The antipathy that he claims to have for words such as unreal, invisible reveal his compromised limited sensibility. And the eternal, idiotic comparisons with Proust, Joyce, and Mann demonstrate the closed and negative willingness with which he read the work. I am tired of these ridiculous simplifications. Because there is asthma, grandmother, mother there has to be Proust, as if I were not as asthmatic as Marcelo".

<sup>2</sup> For further reading about this issue see the chapter "Paradiso en el Boom" in Rafael Rojas' book *La Polis Literaria. El boom, la revolución y otras polémicas de la guerra fría*.

memory of the most immediate things. But quickly things began to get complicated<sup>3</sup>.

When the Cuban Revolution comes to power in 1959 Lezama supports it, as is evident in some of his texts from that period. However, his novel *Paradiso*, published in 1966, is characterized as decadent and pornographic due to the homoeroticism found in Chapter VIII. The situation gets worse in 1968 when Lezama is a member of the jury that grants the poetry prize “Julián del Casal” to the book *Fuera del juego* by Heberto Padilla, a poetry book that is highly critical of the revolutionary process<sup>4</sup>. The last two works that were published while he was alive, *Poesía completa* and *La cantidad hechizada*, appeared in 1970. From that year on, both his work and his person were condemned to silence and ostracism. It was not until the mid 1980s, many years after his death in 1976, that Lezama’s figure was rescued from oblivion and his work was published again. In 1985 the Cuban publisher *Letras cubanas* published his *Poesía completa*, in 1987 they also published his

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<sup>3</sup> I have taken this quotation from Jose Prats Sariol’s article “Paradiso: Recepciones” that is included in the critical edition of *Paradiso* that appeared in the collection Archivos de la Unesco.

<sup>4</sup> Heberto Padilla was jailed for his book of poems and forced to make a public confession in which he accused José Lezama Lima of being a counter-revolutionary.

*Cuentos*, an anthology of his essays in 1988, and his novel *Paradiso* in 1991.

With respect to the term neo-baroque that was used to try to define a good part of the new Latin American literature, Lezama also tried to distance himself from this characterization. He accepted the validity of that term to read his work, as he had demonstrated in many of his essays, especially in his book *La expresión americana*, but he did not consider it a valid term to understand the creative process of the other members of the Boom. In a letter to Carlos Meneses dated August 3, 1975, he stated the following:

I believe that the term Baroque is beginning to stink, a product of habit and weariness. With the adjective baroque they try to express ways that deep down have very radical differences. García Márquez is not baroque, neither are Cortázar or Fuentes; Carpentier is neo-classical, Borges much less so. The manner in which our literature took Europe by surprise made them use this old characterization. [...]

A few of his poetic works and essays appeared in English after the translation of his novel *Paradiso* in different journals<sup>5</sup> but it is

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<sup>5</sup> Worthy of highlighting is Volume 74 of the journal *Review* dedicated to *Paradiso*. The volume contains a translation of the essay "Confluences" by Andrée Conrad, we also include our own translation of this essay in this anthology. Included in volume 74 are various essays about the novel among them texts by Mercedes Cortázar, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Julio Ortega, Severo Sarduy, J.M. Alonso and the previously mentioned Andrée Conrad.

not until 2005 when the University of California Press publishes an anthology with his poetry in English under its collection “Poets for the Millennium”, edited by Ernesto Livon-Gossman, that another complete book of his is published in English. This anthology also includes three prose texts: an interview of Lezama, one of his letters to Severo Sarduy, and his essay “Confluencias”, one of the few essays written by Lezama that had been published in English<sup>6</sup>.

We believe that in order to gain a full understanding of Lezama Lima’s work, his essays are as essential as his poetry. Poetry and the essay are the two genres that Lezama Lima first worked in and these constitute the totality of his work, with the exception of a few short stories that he published between the 1930s and 1960s when he published *Paradiso*. He could not finish his other novel, *Oppiano Licario*, that was published posthumously in 1977.

Lezama Lima, along with Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz, is perhaps one of the most important essayists in Latin American culture because of the originality of his thinking and language, and because of the cosmopolitan nature of his work, without it ever

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<sup>6</sup> In 2002 *The New Centennial Review* published a dossier dedicated to the Cuban journal *Orígenes* where a few of Lezama’s essays appeared: “De Orígenes a Julián Orbón”, “Orígenes”, “Las imágenes posibles”, “La secularidad de José Martí”, “La otra desintegración”, “Después de lo raro, la extrañeza”.

ceasing to be profoundly Latin American. Together with Borges and Paz, Lezama also occupies a central role in the creation of intellectual webs throughout the continent fomented by the various journals he edited such as *Verbum* (1937), *Espuela de Plata* (1939-1941), *Nadie Parecía* (1942-1944), and *Orígenes* (1944-1956). These journals published works by the most important writers in Spanish as well as translations and critical works of the most relevant contemporary artists. Octavio Paz called the journal *Orígenes* the most important journal in Spanish.

## II

This anthology tries to establish a dialogue among three of the scenarios from which a poet constructs his poetics. The first of these scenarios is structured around the moment the poet reflects about himself and his creative process when reading the work of a consecrated poet; a gesture through which he tries to construct his own literary genealogy and establish a critical distance from the poetic tradition that precedes him. The second of these scenarios is a self-reflection exercise, where an author indicates to us how to read his work and literature. The third scenario of reading is where

the poet, through the rhetorical devices of his own poetry, performs his poetics.

When one speaks of poetics, we think primarily of the second one of the scenarios previously described or of a mix of the second and the third, trying to establish a dialogue between the expressive device of the poems and the reflections that the poet has about his own work. However, we do not tend to grant the same importance to the moment when the poet we study confronts the work of another poet. This erasure probably occurs because it is associated with imitation, to the copy of a model. In the classic concept of the author, translation, gloss and commentary of others' texts were considered as important, if not more, than the 'original' work of the author. It is not like this in modernity where, if we believe Octavio Paz, the only form of tradition that is perceived as legitimate is the radical and constant rupture with the past and where influences, if we believe Harold Bloom, provoke more anxiety than anything else. And yet, there is a detail that cannot be ignored, especially when studying a poet, and it is that when poets compile their work, they include their own texts as well as any translations that they made.

The act of appropriating another's language into one's own, of trying to resolve with one's own language what another said with his language and in a foreign tongue, constitutes a decisive moment in the formation of every contemporary poet, perhaps because this act constitutes an anti-modern gesture without which it would be impossible to conceive the singular and marginal space that the poet occupies in modernity.

Having said that, why is the study of that moment when a poet reads another poet so important? It is because this way we discover not only his affinities but also his phobias. Upon confronting the work of another writer, with another vocabulary, he not only discovers a positive form of expression but the poet also measures himself against a creative danger. When a poet situates himself in relation to another, he sees it first and foremost as a creative problem. How does a poet confront and try to resolve the problems that he broaches in his work? In which areas does he succeed or fail? A poet confronts another one that he considers a milestone in culture while at the same time perceives him as an exemplary failure, an expressive form that has brought tradition to

a dead end, an *aporia*. And it is this milestone-aporia that allows and incites the creative gesture that inaugurates his or her own work. One writes because one thinks that others did not succeed at saying what had to be said. Below, I include an example of one of the most well-known writers in Spanish, Jorge Luis Borges, as well as the most debated poet in the Spanish language whose work has generated more phobias and *philiias* than any other, Luis de Góngora.

Jorge Luis Borges' challenge to the homage being paid to Luis de Góngora on the European side of the Atlantic in 1927 is emblematic of the visceral reaction that another writer's work can provoke: "I, too, am ready to remember Góngora once every 500 years...". Góngora is a constant preoccupation for Borges during the 1920s and '30s; in fact, it was his great preoccupation as a writer. Góngora is perhaps the writer most quoted in Borges' essays, although it was always to revile him. What would become of a writer without his counter examples, without those forms of writing that he rejects, without his phobias? Can we understand a writer who wrote *A Universal History of Infamy* without his art of

insult? At the moment when Borges was convinced that literature was just a syntactic event<sup>7</sup>, Góngora's *Soledades* constituted one of the greatest challenges since it is one the most anomalous syntactic acts produced in Spanish. The most curious thing is that Borges inverts the reproach that many of Góngora's critics posit. Borges reprimanded Góngora for not daring to accept that literature is only played in the syntax, in the prosody, and for continuing to pretend that it also has to be a mystery, even if it is a mystery made only of rhetorical tricks. Towards the end of the 1930s and the first years of the 1940s, the notion that Borges has of the literary changes radically, as does his perspective about Góngora. In *Los Conjurados* (*The Conspirators*), his last book, he dedicates a beautiful poem to Góngora. The poem merges Borges' and Góngora's voices. The two enemy-poets end up by speaking as if they were one and the same. He directs the final appeal of the poem to both of them: "I wish to return to the common things: water, bread, a jug, some roses".

The poets that Lezama dedicated the most attention to during his literary career were: Luis de Góngora, Stephane Mallarmé, Paul

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<sup>7</sup> "Literature is fundamentally a syntactic event. It is accidental, linear, sporadic, and otherwise common" ("Elementos de Preceptiva", 1933).

Valéry, and the Cuban poet Julián del Casal<sup>8</sup>. One cannot study French or Spanish literature and thought without understanding the great influence that Góngora and Mallarmé's writings had in their languages. Góngora and Mallarmé, each in his own language, are the poets that have generated the greatest tradition of exegetes, perhaps because they are considered the most hermetic poets in their respective language. One could do a history of French thought, from Valéry to Quentin Meillassoux, by studying the different ways in which different thinkers have positioned themselves before Mallarmé's poetry. Góngora, who was the most discussed poet of his time, the seventeenth century, was also extraordinarily influential on both sides of the Spanish Atlantic during the early twentieth century until 1950. His influence, whether because of great admiration or rejection, on figures such as Rubén Darío,

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<sup>8</sup> Despite the importance that these poets have to understand Lezama's poetics, little has been written about this topic. Rubén Ríos Ávila's article "The Origin and the Island: Lezama and Mallarmé" and Pablo Lupi's book *Reading Anew: José Lezama Lima's Rhetorical Investigations* as well as his essay "Espectros de Mallarmé: apuntes sobre la crítica imaginaria de Lezama" included in the anthology *Asedios a lo increado. Nuevas perspectivas sobre Lezama Lima* are important reflections about the relationship between Lezama and Mallarmé. Of what has been written about the relationship between Lezama Lima and Góngora, the most important articles are "Apetitos de Góngora y Lezama" and "Lezama, Góngora y la poética del mal gusto" by Roberto González Echevarría; "Exclusión y afirmación en Góngora" by Arnaldo Cruz Malavé who approaches Góngora through a study of the baroque that Lezama and Severo Sarduy traced in their essays and "Soledades habitadas por Lezama" by Remedio Mataix. About the relationship Lezama-Valéry I only know *Paul Valéry y el mundo hispánico* by Monique Allain-Castrillo. To study Lezama's reading of Julián del Casal, see Arnaldo Cruz Malavé's book *El primitivo implorante* and his introduction and his annotations of the essay "Julián del Casal" that appeared in the online journal *La Habana Elegante* in 2013. The book *From Modernismo to Neobaroque: Joyce and Lezama Lima* by César Salgado is one of the most important to learn about the relationship that Lezama had with other writers.

Alfonso Reyes, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Jorge Luis Borges, many of the Spanish poets from the Generación de 1927 (Gerardo Diego, Dámaso Alonso, Jorge Guillén, Federico García Lorca), Octavio Paz and Lezama, is decisive.

The dialogue that Lezama maintained with Mallarmé's work could be synthesized in the following question-problem: Why does the destiny of a poem depend on being able to learn how to think with propriety about the place that paradoxes have in thinking, the deviations in morality, and islands in culture and geopolitics? Lezama through his confrontation with Góngora faces the following creative dilemmas: Can the literal meaning of a work constitute its principal mystery? Can we speak of a cosmovision of a poem when all its dilemmas dissolve into its form? Can the surprise, the shock that modern poetry produces transform into a collective experience, into one of the factors that configure the *sensus communis*, "the unanimous" as Lezama calls it?

Paul Valéry was still alive and productive when Lezama began to publish in the 1930s and was one of the most influential figures in Latin American and Spanish poetry in that moment. Valéry's influence and the study of the poem "Le cimetière marin", save the

young Lezama, according to his own words, from many of the temptations of Modernism and the Avant-garde: “Studying that poem put an end to the following things: To poetry as a copy of pictures traced by dreams. Proust’s nightmare. To facile pastiches of folklore in the Spanish style... To the superficial accumulations of surrealism” (“Conversation about Paul Valéry”). But Paul Valéry’s work is also a challenge for Lezama. What happens to the poem if inspiration and poetic furor are dismissed. These two are the mechanisms with which tradition tried to explain the transition from possibility—the ‘before’ of a work, its ‘outside’—to the act, the very work. What happens with that void, with the threshold that separates the work understood as an entity realized and finished and with a vocation of totality from the materials, the fragments, the pieces with which it is configured? What happens, as is the case with Valéry, when the “before” of a work becomes the creative space *par excellence*? Julián del Casal was the nineteenth-century Cuban poet about whom Lezama wrote more perhaps because he was a highly controversial figure and because through his work it was possible to think through one of the great dilemmas that organized the Latin American tradition at least until Lezama’s

generation: How does one build traditions in Latin America where the failure of the attempt to appropriate/rewrite a foreign model is constitutive and also the driving force of tradition itself?

Due to space constraints in this introduction I cannot expound on all the problems outlined above. I am going to concentrate on some of the relevant aspects of Lezama's reading of Góngora's work. I will conclude this brief introduction with a short section where I discuss the topic that, in my opinion, provides structure to all of Lezama's work and lends its name to this anthology: a poetic order of excess.

### III.

Alfonso Reyes compares the exegetical passion that Góngora's work awakened to the passion aroused by contemporary authors such as Robert Browning or Stéphane Mallarmé. This passion went to such an extreme that the work of these authors was 'translated' into their own language, even by some of their contemporaries. Jules Lemaître translated Mallarmé's work into French and Góngora's critics did the same with his work. But what type of rhetorical, semantic, syntactic, prosodic, and lexical estrangement

does a work of art must have in order to be translated into a simplified version of its own language? When this occurs, what is in question, above everything else, is the literal meaning of the work. Everything is up for discussion: the mythological allusions, the allegorical or moral meaning of the text, the polysemy of its symbols, its possible interpretations; but the process always begins with a dispute about the literal meaning of the words and the way in which they display on the page. It seems as though the obscure, the mysterious, in Góngora begins with the materiality of the letter, the lexicon chosen, and the syntactic order.

Lezama tells us in his essay “Serpent of Don Luis de Góngora” that a poet like Góngora—who dislocates the syntax of Spanish to the point of making it unrecognizable—forces his critics to always begin with a debate about the literal meaning of each verse; what is in question is not what he wished to say but what he actually said. Góngora’s language tries to establish a single meaning for the poem after all other previous meanings through which reality is organized have been discarded. As Bastasar Gracián tells us in his book *The Critic (El criticón, 1657)* in a world like the Baroque, where everything is ciphered and where the immediate meaning of things

has become inaccessible (“*one can no longer understand bread as bread, but rather as earth, nor wine for wine, but rather as water, to the extent that even the elements are ciphered in the elements*”) the task of the poet is to attempt to reinvent a single meaning, reinvent the face value of things<sup>9</sup>. But this literalness is of a new type because it is only subject to the artifice of language. Góngora’s critics, more than hermeneutists, as I have already stated, are translators: they attempt to fixate, reveal the mystery of the letter. Góngora’s obscurity is not because no one could allegorize like him, or that his language unveils the great mysteries of the world, but rather, as Lezama points out at the end of his essay as he quotes Góngora: no one heard what he said because no one had ever seen a world like that<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The only known letter where Góngora defends himself from his critics states that “the confusion of those from Babel was not because God confused them with many languages. It was they who in their own language got confused ‘taking rock for water and water for rock’”. The obscurity and confusion for which his poetry gets attacked arises from a language that has lost its capacity to refer to things such as they are. Gerardo Diego in a text entitled “Góngora y la poesía moderna” comments the following about this letter: “It was a warning that he, Góngora, wants to be interpreted at face value, even though the language from *Soledades* because of the delicate nature of the allusions and the supposed previous learned could result obscure for the non initiated, but after clarifying it it should remain unambiguous”.

<sup>10</sup> We can hear echos of Damaso Alonso’s “Claridad y belleza de las *Soledades*” in Lezama’s essay. Alonso tried to separate two of the topics that had accompanied every reading of Góngora’s *Soledades*: obscurity and difficulty. In order to dissolve this association between obscurity and difficulty, Alonso returns to the classic topos of *perspicuitas* where the clear and the difficult are not always considered antonyms and can counter the obscure. Lezama says that there is clarity in Góngora, too much of it; so much that things disappear and are hidden by a light that blinds. The light is so intense that it has a similar effect on things as darkness. Instead of speaking of light, it would be more accurate to speak of a sparkling to describe the disintegration of objects in light.

The question that sustains Lezama's reflection about Góngora centers around the weight that form has with respect to mystery and whether a mystery that holds itself up only through form, and that is divorced from collective beliefs, is sustainable. Can the poetic work propose its mysteries, its enigmas, only as formal problems or does it need a philosophical substratum, as is the case with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in her poem *Primero Sueño* (*First Dream*), or religious ones as is the case with Saint John of the Cross and all mystical poetry? What is the viability of two of the great utopias imagined for the work of art: the possibility to write a book about nothing as Flaubert imagined, where everything that happened occurred in its form, or the possibility to write an absolute book that can replace the world as Mallarmé proposed? These are two positions that approximate each other because what they attempt to do is to separate the work of art from reality either because the work refuses to reproduce any content that is imposed on it or because the work tries to impose its own rules on the world. This issue leads us to another question: Can a mystery that lives only in the form overcome its condition of shock, of pure surprise, of whim?

The tradition of Spanish-language poetry, according to Lezama, has seen itself trapped in two models for the work of art that do not manage to resolve the dilemma that the modern work of art confronts: how can you invent a cosmology for the work after we have learned that the great belief systems that organized reality, what Lezama calls the unanimous, have fallen into crisis and we accept that the innovations that the work of art has realized at the level of form cannot subsist without some type of dialogue, however precarious, with the plural systems of belief that abound in our contemporary world? The two models at hand failed for different reasons: the mystics' model dared to defy all existing meanings with the goal of finding a transcendent certainty that lives outside of language and was shared by its contemporaries. But in the modern world there is no certainty either inside or outside language that we all share. Góngora's model, through a radically immanent notion of the work of art, destroys all existing meanings and constructs a single meaning for which there does not exist any cosmology that corresponds to it. But a cosmology cannot be created just with the experimentation at the level of the form and the modern work of art cannot survive without it.

Góngora was able to find a solution to this aporia but gave it up. The landscape that could have saved him—the poetry that turns its back to cosmology dwells in a wasteland—was the American landscape. But Góngora’s poetry, so daring in almost all other things, preferred to stay in the hackneyed aquatic metamorphoses of Greco-Roman mythology. Góngora’s America whose flora and fauna turns out to be fraudulent and announces the vision that Hegel would propose in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* about the American continent three decades later: “America, then, is a nature that has fallen into original sin, into a paradoxical unresolvable illness between nature and spirit”(La expresión americana). It will be from this territory that lived so many centuries outside of Western books, outside the *Geist*, of the Western civilizing project, where Lezama will try out his project to create a cosmology for the modern work of art that he will denominate *las eras imaginarias (the imaginary eras)*.

It will be in his book *La expresión americana* (1957) where Lezama attempts, for the first time, to replace the study of cultures for the study of imaginary eras. Before defining what these

imaginary eras are, Lezama is interested in distinguishing them from Spengler's *Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (*Morphology of World History*) and from T.S. Eliot's mythical-critical method. Spengler in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*) proposes studying the different civilizing processes as if they were biological cycles; he attempts to find analogies (affinities in form) and homologies (affinities in function) between cultural phenomena from different historical epochs. Eliot takes as a point of departure the impossibility of modern poets to emulate ancient ones due to their inability to create new myths. The modern work of art for Eliot can only aspire to be a gloss to foundational texts: "creation was realized by the ancient poets, for us contemporary poets what we have left is combinatorial play" (*La expresión americana*). If the modern era lacks myths, Lezama thinks it is largely because modern poets have not created them. It is the poets that have to direct the energy of the modern to that zone of gestation, of possibilities where myths are created. It is not about trying to find the mythical in the *arjé*, the fundamentals, nor in what is encased in darkness, what is previous to any causality. Every myth is a theater of metamorphosis. The origin is no more than a moment

inside becoming, the moment that Lezama defines as difficult (“only that which is difficult is stimulating”) because it is what incites creation: “a becoming of a form in which a landscape goes to its meaning” (*La expresión americana*). More than proposing finished forms, a myth designs an itinerary for the transformations. All compilations of myths ought to carry the title that Ovid gave to his: *Metamorphosis*. Imagination, like myths, does not bring the tablets of the law but instead unfolds a map of possible paths for the mutations, the changes, for the metamorphoses.

The metaphorical subject, who is in charge of configuring the *imaginary eras*, was not only anchored in a concrete space (the American space) but also turns his gaze to a specific time (the past). But not to the past that was sealed to us because of its definite and irreversible character. The task of the metaphorical subject was to discover new meanings in the past. But how can one discover new meaning, the potentiality in the past? New potentialities in the past are activated when two images that originated in two different historical moments and with no previous relationship between them are counterposed, contrasted. The metaphorical subject revives

these images by offering them a causality that is totally different from the one imposed on them by their own culture and releases these images from the regulated itineraries, the limits, that their own historical moment prescribes for them. An afterlife is gifted to an image. There are many affinities between the *Imaginary Eras* of Lezama and the atlas of images that Aby Warburg titled *Mnemosyne*. The topic of Aby Warburg's atlas<sup>11</sup> was also the afterlife, the posthumous life (*Nachleben*) of the image. Warburg, like Lezama, created a science of intervals (*Zwischenraum*) a cartography of the discontinuous life of the image between different historical moments. *Mnemosyne* like *las eras imaginarias* tries to follow an itinerary of an impulse, a seed endowed with the power to create new forms, capable of transcending different times and cultures. These two projects, Warburg's *Mnemosyne* and Lezama's *Eras Imaginarias*, try to invent a mythology for an era that lacks them.

#### IV. A Poetic Order of Excess

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<sup>11</sup> For Aby Warburg see *Atlas Mnemosyne* and also Giorgio Agamben's article "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science" included in his book *Potentialities*.

The main feature of Lezama's originality is his defiance of the concept of uniqueness imposed by Modernity. If one needs to summarize in a single definition what it means to be original in the modern tradition, I cannot imagine any better definition than the one contained in one of the verses that Arthur Rimbaud included in his book of Poetry *A season in hell*. The verse in question goes like this: "I began to consider my mind's disorder a sacred thing".

A very similar concept of originality was claimed by John Stuart Mill in his classic *On Liberty*:

Eccentricity has always flourished when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage which it contained.

To be original in modern times means to consecrate an anomaly, to assert a form of eccentricity that does not bow to any authority, norm or paradigm. This type of originality was defined by José Lezama Lima as a form of complacency. According to Lezama, transgression has become a false devotion, a type of religious cult.

The originality that Lezama proposes inherits from the modern tradition the excess, the defiance of all the conventional forms, the acceptance of the challenge that formlessness imposes to meaning.

But Lezama is also emphatic about the need to find a poetic order that will be capable to shelter that excess.

Lezama thinks about form from its limits and from its margins. Therefore, the concepts through which he approximates this problem are contours and formlessness. The Cézanne phrase “contour escapes one” that Ambroise Vollard quotes in his biography of the French painter constitutes, perhaps, the unit-idea of Lezama’s poetics. As Cézanne’s phrase rewritten by Lezama states in a categorical fashion, it is the contour that escapes us. Things have ceased being inside the safety and the intelligibility of their limits; the contours have lost their solid and definitive nature, they are full of holes and perforations. Between the inside and the outside, between the form and formlessness, it is not possible to establish decisively clear boundaries.

“Coronation of formlessness” a short essay that Lezama wrote on January 2, 1955, is the text where he best explains the order that begins with excess, that aspiration to a norm that we can only access when all the contours have escaped from us. This essay takes as its point of departure a Goethe quote where he affirms:

“The most elevated, the most excellent in man is formless and we must prevent ourselves from configuring it in any way that is not a noble feat”. The quality of man, Lezama continues in his commentary about the phrase, comes from the sacramental dose of mystery and inconformity that it is capable of carrying. The hero, the model of excellence that Lezama’s text proposes following Goethe’s quote, is distinct from the classic hero where individuality (the concrete) and the concept (the paradigm) coincide as well as from the modern hero that only understands his originality in terms of how he or she is different from the rule. The Lezamian-Goethean hero becomes excellent by allowing that that portion of the cosmos, of formlessness that inhabits his soul, be what constructs a new model of feat, what proposes the paradigms. A colossal heroism: order of excess, triumph over formlessness: “For the primitive Greek colossus does not mean size, but figuration, a little doll could be colossal if it achieved its figuration, if it triumphed over the formlessness. A superior order of excess, a new creationist order of man and of the gods”(“Homenaje a René Portocarrero”, 1962). To conceive formlessness, according to Lezama, means following the trace of a becoming that goes “from a nebula to the cosmos”. More

than imposing a form on the formlessness, a sense of finality, we must crown it, capture it without stopping it, allow it to reach its best sense at the moment it escapes.

## **Translators' Note: In Praise of Fidelity and Hospitality**

James Irby & Jorge Brioso

How is it possible to ignore or defy the taboos of knowledge, the 'you will not write this way' professional...commandments?

Julio Cortázar. "Para llegar a José Lezama Lima"

There is no problem as consubstantial with letters and their modest mystery as the one that translation proposes...What are the many Illiads of Chapman to Magnieu if not diverse perspectives on a moving event, if not an experimental gamble of omissions and emphases?

Jorge Luis Borges. "Las versiones homéricas"

To think about translation is to think about accuracy and faithfulness. There are as many translations and theories about translation as there are versions of faithfulness. Unlike being as Aristotle conceived it, faithfulness is said in only one way. What complicates everything is that each one has his own style, his way of saying things, his unique way to be faithful. Pierre Klossowski, for example, according to Michel Foucault in his article "Les mots qui saignent" attempts to be faithful to the *Aeneid* word for word, respecting the placement of each word in Virgil's original Latin

without caring too much about the violence that this principle exerts on French syntax. Pierre Joris, in his introduction to the poetry of Paul Celan entitled *Breathturn into Timestead*, defines the language of the author of “The Meridian” as “a truly invented German” and disqualifies any attempt to try to ‘naturalize’ his poetry when he translates it to English in the following terms: “any translation that makes a poem more accessible than (or even as accessible as) it is in the original will be flawed”. And he continues, “...another problem...concerns what I like to call the present episteme of American poetry...which demands that the language of poetry be as close as possible to the spoken, colloquial language of today...[and which] can all too often induce the temptation to oversimplify the original poem... in a doomed attempt to make the language sound 'natural'”.

Any theory about faithfulness that does not include a reflection about hospitality remains mutilated. If we go by the previous examples, absolute faithfulness to the original does not have much consideration for the language it is getting translated to as well as to the modes of reading that characterize it. Hospitality establishes an intense dialectic between the native and the foreign,

between the starting point (the original language) and the point of arrival. Thanks to hospitality, customs, uses, and meanings in a culture are permeated and stirred by the contact with the other. But this conmotion does not only occur in the place that welcomes the stranger that arrives, the text that travels, it also becomes necessary to transform its customs, meanings, and uses.

To make Lezama's prose and verse suitable to English is not an easy feat. Nor is it easy to force English to fit this writer who makes his own mother tongue sound like a foreign language. Difficult, if not impossible, is the task to do justice to the 'density' of José Lezama Lima's texts. They possess an extraordinary force—in both poetry and prose—by virtue of their radical deviations from usual norms and expectations, their compacted and at the same time expansive verbal mass. In their unpredictability, they resemble surrealist texts, but their vocabulary is far more varied and their notion of the oneiric emerges as radically different.

Lezama's texts recover the organic-vital sense of the work as an organism, that the Romantics gave to this concept. But it would be more just in his case to speak of texts like dense bodies or a convergence of many such bodies, displacing or interpenetrating

one another; cf, the repeated motif of physical bodies traversing spaces amid other bodies in the ten prose poems of *La fijeza*, which both enact and discourse upon alternate kinds of physics. Texts which, as they advance, often move away from their initial elements into seemingly unrelated aggregates. Texts that flow rather than cohering into unified wholes.

Central to the difficulty that Lezama's texts present is their indomitable originality. Originality that even dares, as Cortázar's quote at the beginning of this section tells us, to enter territory that high culture considers in poor taste<sup>12</sup> or as pure and simple grammatical and cultural error. This uncivil Lezamanian originality forces us to question what the limits that separate innovation from error are, the discovery from the nonsensical. This trait of his writing, of course, did not just get him praise. The most influential public intellectual of republican Cuba, Jorge Mañach, in a letter dated September 25, 1949, complained about the inhospitable obscurity that he detected in the poems of the book *La fijeza*<sup>13</sup> of

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<sup>12</sup> Roberto González Echevarría in his text "Lezama y Góngora, la poética del mal gusto" defines this trait that he considers essential in of Lezama as well as Gongora's poetics in the following terms: "Fundamental element of this poetics is poor taste, or the rejection of explicit and implicit rules of poetic decorum, of beauty pursued through aesthetic norms, that have their social corrections" (428-29).

<sup>13</sup> Many of them: "Pensamientos en la Habana", "Diez poemas en prosa y "Danza de la jerigonza" are included in this anthology.

which he said: “I don’t even understand the grammar”. This makes faithfulness to the original even more agonizing for us as translators. How do we translate into the new language that discovery that is so difficult to distinguish from the nonsensical? Is the unintelligible translatable? Can you be faithful to that lack of polish, that indocile, plebeian side of Lezama’s poetry and prose?

It is no small feat translating into English Lezama’s syntax which, in many occasions, borders on the ungrammatical. The radical ambiguity of his use of pronouns is impossible to reproduce in English. His predilection for compound words also presents difficulties. But we already said in this section of our introduction that the passion for faithfulness, near and dear to every translation, has to be completed with an equal appreciation and attentiveness to the language that welcomes the work. In order to do justice to both needs, the care, fidelity to the origin, and hospitality, respect for the other, for the foreign, we have forced English to speak in Lezaman but we have also forced Lezama to acclimate to the English language. It is a double fidelity that can be interpreted as a double betrayal. That is the ironic destiny of translators: their passion for fidelity has earned them the fame of traitors. *Traduttore, traditore.*

One last word about how the translations were done. The process was always the same.

James Irby would do a first version in English which we would then exhaustively revise together.