**The Golden Shower**

***for Douglas Messerli & Pablo Capra at Green Integer***

**Presentation of José Lezama Lima *A Poetic Order of Excess*, *Essays on Poets and Poetry*, translated by James Irby and Jorge Brioso, Green Integer, 2019, at Beyond Baroque, Venice Beach, California**

We celebrate today the release of a book of translations by James Irby and Jorge Brioso. Any attempt to translate Lezama Lima, regardless of the results, should secure a place in literary heaven for the daredevil philologist.

The translations by Irby and Brioso stand as pieces of admirable writing on their own merits. They provide the reader with a portable Lezama, at times remarkable and foreign, and at times convoluted and common place, but always captivating. Lezama's ironic use of "bad poetry" as well as his experiments with "purple prose" pose insurmountable challenges for the translator, who risks transforming the master into a "bruised turtle" (o *tortugón amoratado*) as Lezama was fond of calling the consecrated poetasters of his time.

Allow me to exhibit here one example of the intractable, rarefied Lezama:

*De la tortuga el agua en la papada,*

*empavesa farolada nao de esqueletos,*

*al saludar jovial la mona encaramada*

*en el monitor chillón, sus dos pequeños disertos.*

*From the turtle the water in the jowls*, etc*...* Beautiful and vicious! And, how can we possible solve that "monitor chillón", *the* *gaudy* *monitor*? Perusing the Green Integer anthology, I realized, furthermore, that Lezama makes more sense in English than in the original.

Mind you: I'm not saying that Lezama doesn't make sense in Spanish. *God forbid!* What I am saying is that Lezama's literature is not amenable to the commonsensical. Sense and sensibility in Lezama are Neo-rococo rather than Baroque, and we could speak here, as Lezama does in his essay on Luis de Góngora, of a "sierpe".

Sierpe, the snake, is the conveyor of accursed meaning, as the pursuit of meaning is the Cuban way of pledging allegiance to his nation. The manner in which Lezama Lima distorts and reassigns sense and nonsense is the nightmare on Trocadero Street for the translator.

An aside: The name of the street where Lezama resided most of his adult life means equivocation, quibble or ambiguity. There is a nearby road in the same district called Blanco (*blank*), and when someone loses his train of thought, Cubans like to say that such a person got stuck at the intersection of Blanco y Trocadero: *blank and equivocation*. As you can see, Lezama Lima is a crossroad in more sense than one.

About his prose, others could have written the perfectly transparent *Diary Entries on Descartes and Valéry* (p.217) where Lezama contrasts the Thomist notion of "pure act" to Valéry's idea of "pure event". Lezama pointedly remarks that a "pure event seems to have been made to be swallowed up by time, like some journalistic event", but without identifying the very act of *poiesis*, or poetic creation, as the supreme instance of the "pure event", whose cosmological counterpart must be the *Big Bang*. Cuban letters had to wait for the arrival of Severo Sarduy in order to gain this is important insight. The "pure event" is nothing more than the quantum of action, or the nomenclature of De Broglie rendered in Thomist jargon.

But Lezama's grand prose style is best showcased in pieces like *Serpent of Don Luis de Góngora* (p.220), where the master, liberated from the impromtu style of the journal entry or the magazine vignette, makes a full display of his lavish orchestrations. Both the supple arabesques and the opaque overtures, are rendered in painstaking detail by Irby and Brioso.

I hold in very high regard the newfangled Lezama Lima made accessible to American readers by Green Integer. One caveat: Lezama Lima is as multifarious as God himself, and as many splendored as a Tibetan deity. We, worshipers of Lezama Lima, have each our personal image of the godhead. Let's say that Lezama Lima is to Cubans what Idaho is to Americans. Inevitably, I will speak tonight about my own private Lezama Lima.

I read many if not all of the essays collected in *A Poetic Order of Excess* more than 40 years ago. They made an impression on my youthful mind, and a number of the more fortunate phrases and hypothesis have stayed with me over the years.

To the poetry itself (of which the volume by Green Integer, offers a delicious sample in *Thoughts in Havana* and the *Ode to Julian del Casal*) I return daily. Regarding Lezama's thought, or what has been dubbed his "System", I certainly have internalized some of its lingo and almost all of its standard imagery.

The manner in which key ideas are articulated by Lezama are important for any lyric poet whose aim is the reversal of the poetic order. And yet, those very ideas and their peculiar mode of expression have established an unbreakable bond with the ideals of a corrupted form of nationalism: they've become an ideology.

Lezama, the inscrutable and unmanageable, is now the canon. Lezama is as inescapable as the ocean that surrounds the island, an oceanic presence himself —or rather, as Virgilio Piñera, the second banana to this proverbial straight man puts it: as unavoidable as "the accursed circumstance of the water everywhere" (*la maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes*).

The double act simile is not unwarranted, for Lezama is first and foremost, a comic poet—although, ocasionally, in a reversal of roles, Virgilio has played the straight man to our oversized and overidealized banana. Virgilio sneers at Lezama's overblown encyclopedism, at his petit-bourgeois smoking-room aestheticism. It was James Joyce who told us that "music-hall not poetry is the criticism of life", and both our major writers of the XX century seem to concur.

The alternative title for Lezama Lima's novel *Paradiso* could very well be *The Comedy,* albeit divine. The preposterous "d" in the title reads as a subtle, cultured wink-wink. Lezama, the devout Catholic, was concerned with the comedic possibilities of the sacred; Virgilio, with the desacralization of all things holier-than-thou. In Virgilio's first novel *Rene's Flesh*, published in Buenos Aires in 1952, Jesus Christ is a laughing ventriloquist doll.

Lezama Lima said: *When my thoughts are obscure I write poetry; when I am more lucid I write prose—*as stated in the Introduction of *A Poetic Order of Excess*, by Irby and Brioso.

But rather the opposite is true. Lezama is a lucid poet and an obscure prose writer. The transparency of his poetry derives from the purity of his premise. He starts from nothing and fiercely commits himself to this basic principle, a sort of primitive axiom which from his earliest poem (*Death of Narciso*, 1937) becomes the center of gravity of his rhetoric. Lezama probes deeper into the void with each new work. The Spanish Baroque fascination with emptiness merges in him with the vertigo of claustrophobic insularity.

His affinity with Valéry and Mallarmé stems from the same source. Woe to those who assign a meaning, a feeling, or even a sense of the picturesque to Lezama's verses. At his most evocative, Lezama's writing is about nothing. *Death of Narciso* crashed the 20th century as the aesthetic manifesto of the new solipsistic school: *Narciso*, the crasher, was concerned with the act of reflection in and of itself. Neither is Lezama poetics ordinary art for art's sake; Lezama Lima's poetry is *Wille als Vorstellung*: Will as representation. In other words: Creation from Nothing.

He's not alone in this. José Martí, his heroic forerunner, attained—also at the earliest stages of his career—the perfect poetic vacuum. Martí was exalted to the position of national apostle not by way of politicking but of saintly sacrifice to the Void.

Martí, the writer, became a martyr long before his fall at the Dos Ríos incident during the Cuban-Spanish War. Even at that juncture, Martí refused to die as a hero and to produce meaning. In Dos Ríos he is the casualty of chance: he is *Narciso*, the preemptive Lezamian trope.

In *Ismaelillo* (published in New York, 1882) Martí kills meaning (literally: *kills the thing he loves*), for his great poem is not about a lost child, nor about a love child as they taught us in grammar school, but about the birth of Art as the offspring of the Will, or the advent of imagination in exile.

Because it is impossible to comprehend the inapprehensible, José Martí is, much like Lezama Lima, very difficult to translate, as stated by professor Roberto González Echeverría: "Martí doesn't travel well". When we translate Martí into English or into any other language, we give meaning to the meaningless, and add an extra dimension to his words.

The same goes for Lezama. A secondary operation could make him intelligible but uninteresting. Martí and Lezama are closed systems: the poet as incommunicado. When we speak of Lezama's hermeticism we don't take that notion seriously: but one does not become a follower of Hermes unless there is the promise not to make plain the radically arcane. There is a sacred oath that obliges the bard to withhold his secret.

*Ismaelillo* is Martí's homunculus, not a real person, and much like *Death of* *Narciso*, the foundational poem of Modernism is a hermetic text. Martí and Lezama are practitioners of the the gay science, or *fröhlicke Wissenshaft*. Many if not all of Lezama's essays are alchemical treatises and require a foreknowledge of the mysteries, membership to the ancient brotherhood of the Ermine (La Habana was founded in 1519, exactly 500 hundred years ago, under the patronage of St. Christopher, Chrisophorous and *Chrisophos*, transmuter of lead into gold, the living Sulphur). Lezama's abode at Trocadero Street is a Philosopher's Dwelling, the Aleph in Borgean fashion. In short: Lezama's hermeticism must be taken in earnest or not taken up at all.

Which amounts to say that Lezama is not for everybody, that he is an aristocratic writer, and that all his subsequent popularity and popularization amounts to very little and add nothing to his understanding. The surest road to Lezama is Tradition—the occult Tradition, that is— and that path requires qualifications that go beyond the literary. The New Age aficionado, not the semiotician, is the ideal reader for Lezama *Opus magnum*.

But we are gather here tonight to talk about Lezama Lima as literary phenomenon, and we could even go as far as to associate his work with those of the writers of the so-called Latin American *boom*. But, as an artist, Lezama is closer to Sir George Ripley and Nicholas Flamel, to Michael Maier and Paracelsus, than to Mario Vargas Llosa. Lezama condescended to such a kinship out of abject necessity.

When Lezama does history, particularly Cuban history, he is not interested in play-acting the part of the historian, but that of the initiated, the adept: this is how he points his cigar to a passage in Christopher Columbus *Diaries* in which the Admiral sees a burning branch in the skies above Cuba, or when—in the introduction to the *Anthology of Cuban Poetry* (1965)—he recounts the episode of the jeweler polishing his gold coins and creating a golden tree as a foundational image (*Creators by imago*, he calls the key characters and antiheroes of his "imaginary eras").

Through the above mentioned and many other passages of his writings Lezama seems to be telling us: *It's the Alchemy, amigos!* And yet we don’t take him at his word: on the contrary, we insist in making of him a purely literary phenomenon. And he resigned himself to be one, to become Cortazar's freak and the darling of the Latin boomers. But he was confident that some future member of the secret cabala would engage in dialogue with the obscure Lezama, Artist and Imperator, and that a prospective interpreter would realize that it was no fluke that the name of his favorite haunt in the occultist city of La Habana was *The Golden Shower*.

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