

José Lezama Lima,

Features of Modernity or the Aesthetics of an Era

By Lillian Bertot

Modernity, whenever it appears,
does not occur without a shattering
of belief, without a discovery of the lack
of reality in reality—a discovery linked
to the invention of other realities.

Jean-François Lyotard

“La filosofía del clavel” [“The philosophy of the carnation”] is the first poem of the collection “Enemigo rumor” (1941) [Enemy Rumor] by José Lezama Lima. This poem is dedicated to the creative act. To the ephemeral flower of creation that beats in the chaotic wind of the image, and that seizes on to existence, to the potential of the image, facing in confirmation the “enemy whisperings” that are or are not the life and death of the image.

Immersed in the very moment of creation the poetry of José Lezama Lima is in form and content a homage to the ever changing, ever evolving act of creation. In this sense José Lezama Lima would precede by several years the so-called postmodern aesthetics as defined by Ihab Hassan, and would remain inserted in what Roland Barthes also calls ‘modernity.’ In the specific case of Lezama, the Cuban achieves the deconstruction of the image and achieves it by “weaving” and “unweaving” the image through what he called “imaginary eras” and the “labyrinths of the word.” Lezama, in the tradition of the [jitanjáfora] or of the [gaseiforme] novels finds himself not at the point of the pre-word, or of the pre-novel, but at the point of the pre-image, and one must surrender to the delight of creation, where there will always be metaphors of multiple meanings to “celebrate the platonic feast”.

About José Martí Lezama Lima said: he was “the first of our trustworthy,” [the paraphrase is mine], in verifying, the deep and unearthed life of words without “waking up their shadow”. And he added: “There is the trustworthy in the oblique of the verbal breastbone, but already then, there remain the words, in line and domesticated [...] the maternity of the shadows is liquidated, the preservation, the arborescence that dictates the flow of the river, is always kept and caressingly respected.” (*Obras Completas* [Complete Works] “The Sentence of Martí” p. 578)

In paraphrasing Lezama’s text, upon imposing a terse and lineal order to his prose, we noticed that it exhibits sentence embedding, an innovative feature in Martí’s prose as has been noted by scholars on Martí, also hyperbaton, the innovative feature of Góngora’s baroque style to which we allude, although this essay does not deal with either the literary prose, nor the prose in Lezama’s essays, but with his poetry. Innovative Martí, modern, but ultimately static, hidden. (*OC*, p. 578).

The poetry of José Lezama Lima is a poetry that from “Death of Narcissus” on situates us at the very moment of creation: “Danae knits time/gilded by the Nile./ wrapping lips/ as they passed,/ among flights/and untied lips”. (*OC* p. 653) [All the poetry has been interpreted by the author.]

It is a poetry whose incantation consists in allowing ourselves to be seized by the surprising, innovative image. The image that as “the wind, the amusing wind, extends like a cat allowing its definition” (“Enemy Rumor”, *OC* 663) but which as the poet exclaims: “Ah, that you escape at the instant/when you had already achieved your better definition”. This is what “The philosophy of the carnation,” the first book of his second collection of poems, “Enemy Rumor” is about. Here the open participation by the poet in the poetic adventure is revealed. Lezama invites us to participate in the formation of the image through its creation. Where is that “dark prairie” that “invites” the poet? Where does “the indefinite alabaster dome recreate itself”? And where does “memory prepare its surprise” like “the deer in the sky,” fresh like the “dew,” burning like a flame”? (*OC* p. 666)

The image as a rhetorical figure in Lezama Lima’s work is nurtured by creation. It is an image whose gleams of associations flow from the happy time of creation where “the hand or the lip or the bird snowed” and whose creative impulse is constant as we read in “The Rolling Sky”: “The rolling sky its intent and graceful time/do not agree in the possession of the carnation/on the coldest nape/of that empire of centuries.” (*OC* p. 664)

Creation and its creative impulse, the force of creation, do not cease imbuing the poet who tells us in “They Advance” (*OC* p. 667): “I breathe the fog/defoliating phantoms,/with smoke as makeup./As a star without signature my hands swimming above./I dream laughing bees/and unbraided moons and the abandonment/ shrunk, dispersed/of secret frights, declaimed snow.”

According to Jerome Klinkowitz, “what characterizes an aesthetic era is its habits of thought.”³ And he adds: “In order to obtain a real idea of the sense of a period, it is better to look at the thinkers themselves, examine their habits of thought that diverge from previous patterns, consider the axioms that are derived from these thoughts.” And he concludes: “In the course of the literary and aesthetic history, the figure of the thinker is made more palpable than

the completely abstract system of thought of the entire era.” But he adds: “When a significant number of thinkers with diverse antecedents and who are devoted to an exceptionally wide range of aspects in the culture, coincide in the practice of their beliefs, one could compare their works, and act toward the elaboration of an aesthetics”⁴

Klinkowitz suggests that Harold Rosenberg, the painter and critic from New York, “dissatisfied with the verdicts of modernism and their endurance releases his painting from the static memoryism.” Of Ihab Hassan, born in Cairo, Klinkowitz suggests: “he goes beyond the literary convention in order to model a new vision of man”.

About the French Roland Barthes he says “he achieves the deconstruction of a system of signs that demonstrates the fluidity of values”⁵ He, however, adds: “Rosenberg, Barthes and Hassan are not interested in the historical origin of a work of art, not even in at least a structural analysis of the form, rather they are interested in deconstructing the work so that the creative activity is evidenced”⁶.

“The enemy rumor,” the memory of other images of other times, the enemy perhaps: “Already in your ears and in its hard blows/ a long beach hits anew/that goes to its memories and to the happy/ date of Apollo and the withered memory./A memory that inflamed the fire/and respected the festoon of the leaves upon naming them/the discourse of the caressed fire.” (“Daily tune” *OC* p. 665). For Lezama Lima creation itself, the flower, proposes a limitation in its consistency: “The rolling sky/over the strange flower of this sky, of this flower,/sole prison: / crown without noise.” (“The Rolling Sky” *OC* p. 664)

In “A dark prairie invites me”: “There one can see, illustrious remains,a hundred heads, bugles, a thousand functions/open their sky, their sunflower silencing.” This is when the poet suggests: “Strange the surprise in this sky,/ where unintentionally footsteps return/and voices sound in its swollen center.” and where “its stable and tight table cloths, rotate” in a constant movement which the poet refuses to stop, because the static, means death.

¹ Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained*. 1992, p. 9

² José Lezama Lima. *Obras Completas*. “La sentencia de Martí”. 1977, p. 578

³ Jerome Klinkowitz. *Rosenberg, Barthes, Hassan. The postmodern Habit of Thought*. 1988, p.1

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4



José Lezama Lima
(1910-1976)

One of the most significant writers of XXth century Spanish American literature. He directed numerous literary magazines, among them *Orígenes / [Origins]* (1944-1956), which greatly influenced Cuban cultural life during those years. Some of his relevant works are *Muerte de Narciso / [Death of Narcissus]*, *Enemigo rumor / [Enemy rumor]*, *Aventuras sigilosas/ [Sly Adventures]*, *Dador / [Giver]* and *Fragmentos a su imán / [Fragments to its loadstone]*. In 1966, he published his novel *Paradiso*, featured for the confluence of his Baroque poetic streak and symbolic character. In all his work all that is Cuban plays a very significant role and according to renown authors, Lezama has vastly influenced numerous Spanish American and Spanish writers. Erroneously catalogued as a “writer of the revolution” Lezama died in Cuba without ever having been allowed to leave the Island.