

Approximations to Cuban Opposition literature

Lillian Bertot, Ph.D.

"Letters can only be mournful or hetaeras, in a country without freedom." José Martí (1)

Commonly called hetaeras or hetairas are the Greek courtiers of refined education and culture. Aspasia, Pericles' friend, and Friné, Praxiteles' model (famous for his statues of Aphrodite), were all hetaeras, prostitutes. Hetaerism, or prostitution, is defined as the sexual trade a woman makes for money, with her own body. And the conjoined signs of bereavement, mourning, symbols of death, are synonyms of pain, absences, crying, fatigue, and hardships.

However, it is not my intention to take apart José Martí's exacting personification, but rather, to conjugate it with the present. It is important to note that the talent of many Cuban writers has been prostituted and that contemporary literature committed to Cuban tyranny, the official literature, which is one of the modalities of that prostitution, separates itself abysmally from that other contestant or opposition literature, that although projecting a panorama populated by images of absence, separation, frustration, imprisonment, degradation and despair; always emerges in defense of art, freedom, and dignity.

According to Reinaldo Arenas, one of the writers from the Mariel generation who left Cuba in 1980: "Dictators and authoritarian regimes could destroy writers in two ways: by persecuting them or by showering them with official perks and privileges. Of course, in Cuba, those who opted for these perks also perished, and in a more undignified and lamentable way; unworthy; people of unquestionable talent, once they swore allegiance to the new dictatorship, they never wrote anything of value again"(2).

Arenas continues: "What became of the work of Alejo

Carpentier, after having written [*The century of lights*]? Awful, twisted dough, it is impossible to read it in its entirety. What became of the poetry of Nicolás Guillén? Since the 1960s his work is dispensable; what is more, it is absolutely lamentable. What became of Cintio Vitier's luminous, although somewhat reactionary essays of the fifties? Where

is Eliseo Diego's great poetry written in the forties now? None of them went back to being what they were; they have died, even though unfortunately for the UNEAC, and for themselves, they continue living" (3).



Eliseo Diego

Reinaldo Arenas, born in 1943, was included by Angel Rama as part of the generation of the ["novísimos"] (the very new), or the ["contestatarios del poder"] (those contesting power), those who, according to Rama, "attempt the cultural transformation of the society in which they live" (4). However, as Alicia Rodríguez notes: "This critical attitude in confrontation with the rigid schemes surrounding them appears in Arenas as an example of a writer that faces a society that passes, successively, from a stage dominated by capitalist-bourgeois (individualist) structures to another with a self-identified socialist system and specifically a Marxist-Leninist system (collectivist)" (5).

Alicia Rodríguez adds: "Arenas, occupies an exceptional place for his antagonism to all orthodoxies without ceding in his creativity and capacity for narrative experimentation. The post-revolutionary reality offers the writer the opportunity to extract his images of a sociopolitical context different from that of the other writers mentioned by Rama, which all are exclusively confronting capitalist societies (Manuel Puig, Antonio Skármeta and Alfredo Bryce Echenique, among others)"(6).

The Cuban revolutionary process that began in 1959 and still continues now in the year 2007 and the well-known partisan and party demands of its leaders culminated in the postulation of an official policy by the Cuban government with regard to



Alejo Carpentier

culture and to intellectual activities in Cuba that has affected similarly all generations of writers and Cuban intellectuals from its adoption in 1961 until today. In the introduction to the compilation of documents that Lourdes Casal makes in her work on "the Padilla case" of 1968, published in the seventies by Ediciones Universal of Miami, the author offers us the following account:

Guillermo Cabrera Infante (and *Lunes*) and his brother Sabá Cabrera Infante (and his documentary on Havana's night life, *P.M.*) were central figures in the first 'crisis' of

the intellectuals (the second was the Padilla case) in the Revolution that culminated with the meetings at the National Library in June of 1961, and the speech by Fidel Castro at the closing session, known as “Words to the Intellectuals”. In this speech, [according to Lourdes Casal], the general structure for the cultural policy of the revolutionary government, effective with ups and downs until 1968 were established, and they were characterized by a relative tolerance in thematic and stylistic questions assuming as a given the support for the Revolution and the commitment to it. (7)



Nicolás Guillén

It was not included in this account, but the aphorism “Inside the Revolution everything, outside of the Revolution nothing” was used in that speech by Fidel Castro. according to historian Hugh Thomas, economist Carmelo Mesa Lago, and literary critic Seymour Menton.

This aphorism, by proposing a breakup in the dialectical relationship between the writer and intellectual *vis à vis* society that for so many years characterized the literary tradition of the West created a polemic (still not resolved) in Latin America with regard to the role that the writer plays, and therefore in literature, in society. (8)

The dissolution of the dialect with regard to Cuban reality proposed by Oscar Collazos in that historical polemic, the issue of not assuming a position at the face of the dominant ideology, while actually suggesting the inverse (against the structures and institutions of bourgeois and capitalist societies) took the form of a buzz word for Argentinean Julio Cortazar, and would become the established norm in the case of Castro’s Cuba. The suspension of critical judgement in the face of Cuban reality (in the face of the process defined as the socialist Revolution) has defined the attitude that has prevailed throughout all these years inside the intellectual cadres of the Latin American left. This “impossible suspension of critical judgement”, as the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa courageously points out in the debate, delineated the ideological camps; with most writers and Latin American intellectuals siding with silence, inaction or censorship. These writers of Marxist pose or Marxist-Leninist militancy (revolutionary) in a way supported Pablo Neruda’s commitment to turn Latin America into a communist paradise. And it was precisely this lack of critical judgement, this suspension of the dialectics, and surprisingly the lack of solidarity with the Marxist principles of opposition in which they toiled, and those that Latin Americans so passionately defended, what would cast Cuban intellectuals and writers into terror, ostracism, collaboration, exile or death. (9)

With regard to Angel Rama, by the way, in 1992 and already in exile Reinaldo Arenas wrote: “Ever since I start-

ed to make statements against the tyranny that I had endured for twenty years, even my own editors, those who had made enough money selling my books, declared themselves my enemies behind my back [...]” This was also the case of Angel Rama, who had published a book of my stories in Uruguay; instead of at least writing me a letter to congratulate me for having left Cuba, because he knew the situation I was in there, since we saw each other in Cuba in 1969, he published a huge article in the *The Universal* of Caracas titled: “Reinaldo Arenas on the way to ostracism.” Rama wrote in that article that it had been an error on my part to have abandoned the country, because everything that happened was due to a bureaucratic problem; that now I would be condemned to ostracism. Arenas adds: “I understood then that the war had begun again, but now more underhandedly, less terrible than the one Fidel waged against the intellectuals in Cuba, but no less sinister”(10).



Ángel Rama

Commenting on the intellectual atmosphere of the first decade of the Revolution, Carmelo Mesa Lago adds: the abolition of author royalties, the nationalization of motion picture companies, theaters, editorials, magazines and newspapers the centralization of cultural activities, editorials and theaters in state organisms (respectively the National Council of Culture, the Book Institute, and the ICAIC- Institute for Cuban Art and Cinema Industry (all now integrated into the Ministry of Culture); and the syndication of all the writers and artists under the National Union of Writers and Artists from Cuba (UNEAC) sponsored by the state, placed the writer and the artist in a dependent position of the state. The latter immediately used its power to influence intellectuals, controlling them or discharging them from their jobs, facilitating, obstructing or prohibiting the publication of their books; the exhibition of their movies or the presentation of their plays; opening and closing editorials and magazines, pressuring writers and artists to assume revolutionary attitudes in their works by praising and critiquing them in the media; and rewarding them with national awards and trips abroad, or punishing them with threats of ostracism and even internment in work camps (11).



Mario Vargas Llosa

Mesa Lago continues: On March 20th, the poet Padilla was imprisoned. The news filtered to the foreign press, and on April 9, 1971 a large group of left-wing European and Latin American intellectuals (among them Jean Paul Sartre, Gabriel García Marques, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, and Mario Vargas Llosa) addressed a letter to Castro expressing their concern on Padilla’s imprisonment and for “the use of repressive methods against intellectuals and writers directed against

them for exercising the right to criticize.” Ten days later Castro answered indirectly: “There are some gentlemen that aspire to intellectual tutelage and to cultural colonialism [...] who want to teach our people from places like New York, Paris, Rome, London, and West Berlin [...] our people should give them a forceful response [...] the inadmissible intent of introducing and maintaining [here] manifestations of a decadent culture, the fruit of societies that are rotten to the marrow”(12).

According to Mesa Lago: In fact until 1977 they had not produced a single relaxing of any of the fundamental aspects of the Cuban intellectual and cultural policies. The resolutions approved in the congresses of the PCC (Cuban Communist Party), on art and culture as well as the new Constitution, ratified the established cultural policies at the beginning of the seventies. In the awards presentation of the House of the Americas in 1977, Armando Hart, minister of the newly created Ministry of Culture, said: “If a jury is going to award a prize to a work that is against the interests of Cuba or of socialism, the House of the Americas [...] would denounce it as infamous in front of the Latin American literary movement”(13).



Reinaldo Arenas, exiled in the US

However, it was not only the dialectic trap that trapped a great part of Latin American and Cuban intellectuals and reducing them to a demented and fanatic orthodoxy in support of the socialist experiment. Although the hegelian game of oppositions has given its fruits in the advancement of human knowledge, the postulate does not suffice to explain all phenomena, and much less poesy. The path of binary structuralism did not produce the expected results, and the explanation of reality had to include the concepts of variants and multiplicities, of underlying features, of stratifications, embeddings, of concatenations, of global rules, of regressions, of oppositions and mutations. The application of the binary method to the society for its transformation has produced the ethical and economic impoverishment of the societies in which it has been applied. The recognition of patterns and taxonomies do not presuppose or by any means determine a total understanding of the reality. The totalizing intent of modifying it, of changing it, or of yielding it unalterable unknowingly has been the great crime of our century: hubris and fall of socialism and the great shame of the west for the intellectual abdication it represents.

An example of this great abdication, ideological fiat and misconstruction of history as it relates to literary criticism can be found in Seymour Menton’s work, published in 1978. With a the cover title *The Narrative of the Cuban Revolution*, the work includes a binary presentation of the texts which are catalogued as “narrative of the revolution” and “the antirevolutionary narrative,” in a page before the

index the author disclaims his responsibility for the crime about to be committed expressing, “his ideological point clearly through the epigraphs of Ernesto Sábato, Octavio Paz and Mario Vargas Llosa” (14) with the following conclusions: The most well-known Cuban novels that have been published after 1959 are artistically innovative and are related only indirectly, in diverse degrees, with the Revolution: [*The Century of Lights*] and [*The Recourse of Method*] by Alejo Carpentier; *Paradiso*, by José Lezama Lima; [*Three Sad Tigers*], by Guillermo Cabrera Infante, and [*Where are the Singers from?*], by Severo Sarduy. [...] In general, the authors have avoided the controversial aspects of the Revolution. There is some censorship of the regime in books published outside Cuba. Of the published works in Cuba, the following are somewhat ambiguous as for their revolutionary fervor: [*Memoirs of Underdevelopment*] by Edmundo Desnoes, [*To live in Candongo*] and [*Pailock, the Magician*], by Ezequiel Vieta, [*Memories of 1936*], by Leonel López-Nussa, and [*County Convicts*], by Norberto Fuentes Cobas. (15)

On August 8, 1996 at the University of Miami, the Cuban poet Rogelio Fabio Hurtado visiting Miami read his work “The Cuban writer today: the canon changes,” still not published. There he said: “I have been a militant in the shadows for twenty-five years” and he proceeded not only to give us an extensive chronology that we hoped to see published, but rather he proposed the reconstruction of the literary canon based on the Cuban vocation for the truth, on the counterpoint of creator emissary with regard to the writer, on the dichotomy official writers or opposition writers and the commitment of the writer to authenticity without limits. He defined the Cuban literary endeavor as a “literary resistance” and he confirmed the break with the Latin American elite.

During the presentation of my book *The literary imagination of the Mariel Generation* (16) August 5, 1995, one of the presenters, Carlos Victoria, stated that the reason he had left Cuba was because of the need he had to live legitimately. Cuban writer and political refugee Alejandro Valdez Lorenzo posed the question of whether the Mariel Generation, which founded a literary group in the United States made up by Reinaldo Arenas, Reinaldo García Ramos, Miguel Correa, Carlos Victoria Juan Abreu, and others, would not extend beyond the parameters of the group and these writers, be more than just the writers of the Mariel generation, but representatives of a wider cultural movement.

Although this relationship Cuba = Mariel would be deduced logically, in the case of the Mariel the insistent assertion by the Cuban government, contrary to evidence, this was an antisocial minority and a marginal group, has until recently prevented the representative and categorical identification of this group of writers, and others in similar circumstances, with the Cuban literary world.

The fact that such representation in literary circles is a reality was lent credence by the essay read by Hurtado, the search for this movement of Cuban intellectuals surrounding the Mariel generation forms the basis of a future essay of mine.

In spite of the offensive by Cuba's communist government against the national culture and the attempt at imposing an official ideology based on collectivist Marxism-Leninism with shades of Stalinism there survives secretly in Cuba and later on in most cases in exile, a common "criollo" culture committed to freedom.

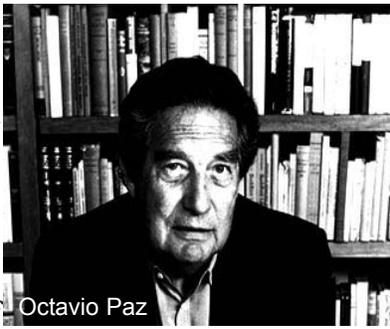
In the economy, in politics, in ethics, and in the aesthetics, freedom forms the basis of a liberal and Christian underlying ideology to the official culture of Cuba. This libertarian ideology, of a deep and long tradition in Cuba, has refused to disappear in spite of the efforts of Castro-communism to eradicate it. Like the writers of the Mariel generation the representative writers of the literature and of the Cuban opposition movement each one in their own way and style, renders tribute to freedom as a moral and aesthetic value.

Aware that freedom is an indispensable requirement for the full development of the individual and of the artist, the writers of this movement confront the totalitarian tyranny in Cuba in all its manifestations because according to them, tyranny leads to corruption, it thwarts creativity, the attainment of virtue and the happiness of the individual.

Based on Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa's definition that the writer should have an unavoidable commitment to truth, the present work researched the work of the main writers of the Cuban opposition movement to identify the significant features of conflict as it pertains to aesthetics so as to reach a better understanding of what has come to be known as "Cuban opposition literature" 1959-2006.

In the arts, the static paralysis of forms and content opposes the dynamism of the image of free associations. In her essay of 1973, *The Cuban Novel of the Sixties*, Gladys Zaldívar suggests the following:

In this boom of Cuban narrative of the sixties, there are aesthetic dissimilarities, plots developed in rural settings, urban, or both in the same story; themes intimately linked to the armed struggle by the revolution that reflect the individual conflict arisen from the new order displacing the old



Octavio Paz

and, naturally, those that reconstruct the vision of reality sustained by traditional values. But each novel always moving within an environment where there seems to be only two possible perspectives of the world: the one given by the realism of the XIX century, that is to say, mimetic, and the one that assumes that other realism, that of the middle of our era, with its mythical load and all the different worlds perfectly accredited as not to be ignored parts of a more complex reality that goes beyond the mere photograph. (17)

However, nowhere else there appear delineated the coordinates of Cuban aesthetics as in the essay of July 1968, "Confluences" by Cuban writer Lima. In that essay read at the National Library in Havana, Cuba in 1969 Lezama Lima sets down the rules of creative activity, goes on to define creation and art, poesis, in dynamic terms, generative, spermatic, an act of being, metamorphosis, of infinite possibilities, omni modal, arbitrary, similar, potential, of momentary visibility, participatory, extensive, oblique, paradoxical, a temporal, aspatial, a perpetuum mobile, terrible in its innocence, marvelous, mysterious, terrible, magic, undecipherable, sidereal, flaming, stellar, pathetic, cheerful, reminiscent, awesome, confused, tender, invisible forge, infinite surprise, phosphorescent, permanent ecstasy of participation in all that is homogeneous.



Guillermo Cabrera Infante, exiled England

The reading of this conference opens an unfathomable abyss between the official literature (pseudo proton, poetic lie, insurrected image, horror vacui, finitude, pessimism, spiraling rupture of a demiurge, demonic, a mirror that does not speak, a lost city), and that other literature that could be called Cuban opposition literature, but which is essentially poesis, and which defines Cuban literature of all times.

Lezama said: "Blissful are the ephemeral that, are able to contemplate movement as an image of eternity, and continue to be absorbed by the parable of the arrow to its interment in the horizon" (17). With regard to this conference Reinaldo Arenas commented in 1992:

In 1969, Lezama read out loud at the National Library what was perhaps one of the most extraordinary pieces in Cuban literature, titled "Confluences". It was the ratification of the creative work, of the love for the word, of the fight for the complete image against all those opposing it. Beauty in itself is dangerous, conflicting, for every dictatorship, because it implies an environment that goes beyond the limits in which that dictatorship subjects the human beings; it is a territory that escapes the control of the political police and where it therefore could not reign. Beauty under a dictatorial system is always dissident, because all dictatorship is unsightly, grotesque; practiced by dictators



Carlos Victoria, exiled in the US

and their agents, an escapist or reactionary attitude. For this reason, Lezama and Virgilio ended their life in ostracism, and abandoned by their friends. (18)

This is the new canon of Cuban literature, the poet Hurtado did not have to go very far, it would be necessary to only “return to the beginning of the circle” to quote Octavio Paz. Only that this canon is like the parchments of the Dead Sea scrolls, hidden, buried, for almost fifty years. Perhaps by those who wanted to turn Cuban literature into the arms of a revolution that hid within itself its annihilation. How much more all-encompassing then is the term of opposition literature and how insufficient to explain the Cuban literary phenomenon of recent years.

NOTES

1 José Martí. *Ideario*. Compiled by Carlos Ripoll. Miami: Fondos de Estudios Cubanos, National Cuban American Foundation, 1995.

2 Reinaldo Arenas, *Antes que anochezca* [*Before night falls*] Barcelona: Tusquets Editors, 1992, p. 116.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Angel Rama. *Novísimos narradores latinoamericanos en marcha* [*Spanish American narrators marching*]. Mexico, March Editors, 1981, p. 48.

5 Alicia Rodríguez. *Literatura y sociedad. Tres novelas de Reinaldo Arenas, Celestino antes del alba, El palacio de las blanquísimas moftas y Otra vez el mar* [*Literature and society: Three novels by Reinaldo Arenas, Celestino Before Dawn, The Palace of the Very White Skunks and Again the Sea*], doctoral Dissertation, Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida, 1987, p. 1.

6 *Ibid.* p. 2.

7 Lourdes Casal. *El caso Padilla: literatura y revolución en Cuba* [*The Padilla case: literature and revolution in Cuba*], documents. Miami: Universal editions, 1971, [pp]. 5-6. Casal adds: “The final events of 1968 had great repercussions and caused a hardening of the cultural line of the revolutionary government as seen in the “militant” declarations of the Congress of Writers and Artists celebrated in Cienfuegos, in October of 1968 [...] in the decision to use only Cuban jurors as jury in the competitions sponsored by the UNEAC [...]; in the selection of militant juries favored for the competitions by the House of the America, for example, Latin American writers residing in their own countries instead to those who reside in Europe[...]; in the fact that the highest positions in the Union of Writers remained solely in the hands of the members of the old intellectual guard of the Party, like Nicolás Guillén and José Antonio Portuondo; in the fact that as juries for the David prizes in 1969 were chosen in the majority the militants of the Party, [i.e]. Portuondo, Guillén, Félix Pita Rodríguez, Cesar Leante [...] p. 8.

8 Oscar Collazos, Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa. *La literatura en la revolución y la revolución en la literatura* [*polémica*] [*Literature in the revolution and revolution in the literature* [*polemic*]]. Mexico, Spain, Argentina, XXI Century n Editors, 1975, pp. 85-86.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Arenas, *Antes que anochezca*, pp. 308-309.

11 Carmelo Mesa Lago, *Dialéctica de la revolución cubana* [*Dialectics of the Cuban revolution*]. Madrid: Editorial Playor, 1979, pp. 162-163).

12 *Ibid.* pp. 164-165. Mesa Lago continues: “Padilla was liberated April 25th after having given a confession to the Ministry of the Interior. Two days later, and three days before the closing session of the Padilla congress, he read a letter of self-imprecation in front of 100 writers and artists gathered in the UNEAC headquarters. In this letter he admitted all his “errors against the Revolution,” he accused Dumont and Karol of being CIA agents, he accepted his connections with some of the signatories of the letter addressed to Castro, denounced the “errors” of four Cuban writers who were present in the meeting: his own wife and three close friends.” What many people did not know then was that the authorities threatened Padilla with the fact that they had already detained and interrogated his wife, writer Belkis Cuza Malé (See testimony in the Nuevo Herald, September of 2006 by Belkis Cuza Malé, in the exile for many years). According to Mesa Lago “three of the accused stood up, accepted their faults and asked for forgiveness, the only one who tried to defend himself against the accusation, alleging they were false, was severely criticized by a high official in the UNEAC. And Mesa Lago adds: “In this climate of increasing tension, on April 30th the Congress approved its final declaration, introducing a harder line in cultural matters. In the future it would not be enough for the writers and artists to proclaim themselves revolutionaries and abstain from criticizing the regime, they would also have to prove their militance by producing political works: “He quotes: “Culture like education is not and could not be either apolitical or impartial. Apoliticism is but a reactionary and shameful attitude in the cultural field. Art is a weapon of the revolution, a weapon against the enemy penetration.” In the declaration it was established that the media “are powerful instruments for ideological education, and their use and development should not be left to spontaneity and improvisation. The control of mass media communication should not be spread among several state organs, but centralized under “a sole political/cultural leadership.” In the selection of personnel to fill the positions in mass communication media, as in the universities and art related institutions ideological and political conditions should be considered.” The declaration also recommended a revision of literary contest rules to insure the revolutionary credentials of the members of the jury and the selection of more revolutionary works.

13 *Ibid.* pp. 169-170.

14 Seymour Menton, *The narrative of the Cuban revolution*. Madrid, Playor, S.A, 1978: “[...] I have never been an unconditional of anything or anybody,” Ernesto Sábato. “[...] without freedom to criticize and without plurality of opinions and groups, there is no political life. And for us modern men, political life is synonymous of rational and civilized life,” Octavio Paz, and “Literature, in general, and the novel in particular, are expressions of dissatisfaction: the social service they lend consists, mainly, in reminding men that the world will always be imperfect, that life must always change,” Mario Vargas Llosa.

15 *Ibid.* pp. 262-263.

16 Lillian Bertot, *The Literary Imagination of the Mariel Generation*. Miami: The Endowment for Cuban American Studies, The Cuban American National Foundation, 1995.

17 Gladys Zaldivar. *Novelística cubana de los sesenta* [*Cuban Novels of the Sixties*]. Miami, Ediciones Universal, 1977, pp. 5-6.

18 José Lezama Lima. “Confluencias.” *Obras Completas*. Mexico, M. Aguilar, Editor pp. 1208-1228.

19 Arenas. *Antes que anochezca*. p. 113.