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# José Martí's Youthful Romanticism (1875-1876)

A young Cuban named José Martí y Pérez wrote a series of essays—chronicles on the political and cultural events of the time—during his stay in Mexico for nearly two years, in 1875 and 1876. Virtually unknown in literary circles when he arrived in Mexico City, the twenty-two-year-old quickly won the admiration of readers as he wrote his journalistic articles in the *Revista Universal de Política, Literatura, y Comercio*. He soon won the friendship of numerous Mexican writers, including Manuel Gutiérrez Májera, Justo Sierra, Ignacio Ramírez, Ignacio Altamirano, Juan de Dios Peza, and Luis G. Urbina. Martí signed many of his essays with the dramatic pseudonym of Orestes—after the protagonist of Aeschylus's tragedies. They have since been collected in one volume, *La clara voz de México*.

Martí's romantic ideas during this period showed a complex world view in which his aesthetic spirit and his social ethic helped define the whole gamut of his opinions on current events, from the latest play staged, to the debates in Congress. He clung to a belief in spiritual experience while at the same time rejecting the Catholic Church. His hostility to Catholicism as an institution was akin to the liberal ideas then reigning in the presidential administration of Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, whom Martí staunchly defended. There could be found a curious dichotomy of thought in his vocabulary. He defined his personal concepts of *el espíritu* and *el alma* as superior to *la razón* while censuring the traditional concept of religion as inferior to *la razón*. Underlying this semantic was his attempt to intellectually reconcile his anticlerical liberalism and his spiritual romanticism. Unlike the Peruvian essayist Manuel González Prada, Martí did not allow his attack on institutional religion and his reformist zeal to negate a realm of the spiritual. Martí's case brings to mind Esteban Echeverría's declaration that "el Romanticismo no es más que el Liberalismo en literatura"—itself an echo of the great romantic Victor Hugo.<sup>1</sup> To cite the lucid words of Howard Mumford Jones, "romanticism tends to imply some sort of radical break with some sort of current conventions, and often makes reference to an idealized world, compared to which the present condition of mankind is unsatisfactory."<sup>2</sup> Martí is closer to the romantic rebel in the molds of Rousseau and Robespierre than to the romantic dreamer or escapist, such as William Wordsworth seeking refuge in nature and fantasy.<sup>3</sup>

In a public debate at the Liceo Hidalgo on "La influencia del espiritismo sobre el estudio de las ciencias en general," Martí takes a conciliatory stand by arguing that both the materialism of the positivists and the spiritism popularized by Allan Kardek were exaggerated.<sup>4</sup> Yet his own inclination between the two poles becomes clear in the same speech:

Con mi inconformidad en la vida, con mi necesidad de algo mejor, con la imposibilidad de lograrlo aquí, lo demuestro: lo abstracto se demuestra con lo abstracto, yo tengo un espíritu inmortal, porque lo siento, porque lo creo, porque lo quiero.<sup>5</sup>

Lack of empirical evidence for the existence of the spiritual does not matter; an intuitive belief is enough for Martí. He feels within himself a knowledge above and beyond deductive logic or sensory perception, and he describes it in terms of *lo ilímite* and *lo vago*. Martí employs the language of paradox characteristic of mysticism: "Con los ojos cerrados veo; y, encerrado en mí, concibo lo que no se cierra."<sup>6</sup> He considers it equally presumptuous to try to deny the inexplicable or to try to capture it in a metaphysical scheme.

The spiritual and the aesthetic are intimately embraced in the mind of Martí, just as they are in José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel*. Music, poetry, and love belong to the immortal realm of the soul according to the Cuban's essays. A hierarchy of aesthetic/spiritual experiences is even suggested. At the pinnacle he places music:

La música es la más bella forma de lo bello: —arrullar, adormecer, exaltar, gemir, llorar: el alma que se plega a un arco: [ . . . ] esta garantía de lo eterno, prometida al espíritu ansioso en el nombre augusto de lo bello: —tanto es esa lengua arrobadora, madre de bellezas, seno de ternuras, vaga como los sueños de las almas, gratísima y suave como un murmullo de libertad y redención. (p. 293)

The preceding passage is typical of Martí's literary style during that period, with its string of consecutive verbs and its skeleton of colons and dashes and conjunctions which help stretch one rhythmic sentence into a paragraph. Note, also, the correlation between beauty and justice in the final simile, very much like Rodó's *Ariel*.

Good music and the poetic imagination, according to Martí, are superior to reason (p. 28, p. 357); and music is more beautiful than poetry "porque las notas son menos limitadas que las rimas." (p. 253) *Lo ilímite* and *lo vago*, already identified in Martí's semantics as spiritual qualities, are ascribed to music and poetry. There is even a dimension of the hereafter: "Post-vida: esto nos dice en sus palabras mágicas la música." (p. 298) On the hierarchy of aesthetic/spiritual experiences, Martí elevates poetic inspiration above verbal expression, be it spoken or written: "Cuando hay luz en el alma, hay en los labios escasez . . . Júzgase al poeta por lo que sueña, no por lo que escribe." (p. 83)

Last, but not least, is love. Jose Martí fell passionately in love with Rosario de la Peña, the Mexican beauty immortalized in Manuel Acuña's poem, "Nocturno". The young Cuban wrote a letter to her in which he described love as something otherworldly and spiritual:

Amar en mí,—y vierto aquí toda la creencia de mi espíritu—es cosa tan vigorosa, y tan absoluta, y tan extra-terrena, y tan hermosa, y tan alta, que en cuanto en la tierra estrechísima se mueve no ha hallado en donde ponerse todavía.<sup>7</sup>

The style is typical of his prose, with the predilection for the pseudosuperlative as well as the abundance of the conjunction "y", commas, and dashes;

all of these details of lexicon, punctuation and syntax help to swell the wave of emotion.

If music, poetry, and love belong in the realm of the spiritual according to Martí, where are God and religion? Martí tried to salvage the message of Christ from what he considered to be its corruption in the Catholic Church. (p. 170) He joined the liberals of Mexico in condemning the violent resistance of many Catholics to the anticlerical Reforma, which had been put into effect not long before his arrival. He wrote of Catholics "incendiando pueblos para mayor prez y honra de la humildísima causa de Dios." (p. 46) The typical pseudo-superlative here accentuates the bitter satire at the end of this sentence, which is twenty-four lines long. The tension built up (Martí's sentences are often unusually long) explodes with the briefest of exclamations at the end: "¡Infames!" Such a dramatic contrast of length followed by brevity typifies the sometimes declamatory style of romanticism—a style which conveys political passion.

The traditional concept of God as dictated by institutional religion has no meaning in Martí's world view. Instead, he redefines God:

Hay un Dios: el hombre;—hay una fuerza divina: todo. El hombre es un pedazo de cuerpo infinito, que la creación ha enviado a la tierra vendado y atado en busca de su padre, cuerpo propio. (p. 55)

This sounds like pantheism, but on another occasion Martí clarifies that the divine power within man is actually the duty to reform society—to assure equality, justice, human dignity, and political independence. This religious duty to social and political causes "es el único Dios digno del hombre." (p. 51) The new cult of *la razón* is the foundation for *la patria*, clearly a substitute for the outdated "culto irracional" of the Church. The substitution of the old religion with the new (reason, education, reform) is described through the use of simile in the following praise for the Colegio de Abogados:

Deben tener los hombres conciencia plena de sí mismos: como el dominio del monarca necesita el púlpito misterioso del Espíritu Santo—lo irracional buscando apoyo en lo maravilloso—, el pueblo de hombres libres ha menester que las cátedras se multipliquen y difundan, y sobre ellos tienda sus alas el Espíritu Santo del derecho, la paloma blanca de la libertad y la justicia. (p. 38)

Yet Martí does not idolize law as an end in itself. Man, he has told us, is God. Man is destined to progress, so that laws—"doctrina muerta"—must be changed by man. That is the essence of the following passage which is graced by both rhetorical devices (the repetition of *fijo*) and poetic resonances (*a*, *t*, and *r* in my italics):

Y bien hace la doctrina muerta en temer a la patria viva; ésta se ve y quiere conocerse; aquella le arranca los ojos con que ha de mirarse y la conciencia con que a sí misma se conocería. Va todo andando y creciendo, de arroyo a río, de río a mar, de madre a hijo, de arbusto a árbol, de niño a hombre, de imperfección a perfección, y de ese error, por la constitución de la naturaleza humana engrandecido, *fijo* se alza en medio de los siglos que corrieron, *fijo* se alza en medio de esta era vigorosa, *fijo* se mantiene ante la marcha análoga de todo; y quiere—loco error—*atraer a sus altares, arrodillar ante su cáliz, atar sobre su madero a esta marcha incesante y perpetua, creciente en fuerza como las marchas*

progresivas, por su propia fuerza secreta arrastrada e impedida, que anda hacia los fines de la tierra sin volver los ojos atrás para mirar al leño atado (p. 54)

The vivifying metaphor, profuse alliteration, and flowing rhythm more than compensate for Martí's verbosity.

If law can be an obstacle to progress, Martí points to the specific plight of the Indian in Mexico as the victim of society and its laws: "Un hombre muere: la ley lo mata: quién mata a la ley?" (p. 115) This laconic sentence provides a sharp contrast to the writer's previously cited verbosity, demonstrating the wide range of styles at his command. One senses a spur to retribution for a crime committed in his appeal to reform unjust laws. The stark syntax suits the trenchant purpose.

Let us now briefly list some social issues in Mexico which won Martí's attention in 1875-1876. If many of his comments could seem curiously contemporary one hundred years later, they tend to reflect a reformist zeal typical of romantic liberalism in nineteenth-century Spanish America.

**THE INDIAN.** Martí's image of the Mexican Indians is one of bestial slavery. They constitute "una raza olvidada" (p. 114) whose redemption will come through obligatory education. (pp. 114, 190, 217) In this respect Martí is closer to José Vasconcelos's educational evangelism than to Manuel González Prada's revolutionary *indigenismo*, since González Prada argued that "La cuestión del indio, más que pedagógica, es económica, es social."<sup>8</sup> The visiting Cuban journalist would have been hard put to preach revolution in Mexico while at the same time applauding the government of President Lerdo de Tejada.

**IMMIGRATION.** "(No fuera urgente buscar un medio de aprovecharse de la inmigración de brazos, sin haber de temer la inmigración de costumbres de una raza extraña, y de las inteligencias desesperadas y perturbadoras que forman en todos los países la masa de inmigrantes?" (p. 29) Martí was not referring to Mexican immigration to the United States, which was slight in 1875. Instead, he was supporting a bill being debated in the Mexican Congress which would encourage European immigration and colonization in Mexico. Justo Sierra, yet to become famous as educator and writer, also wholeheartedly supported the measure as one possible solution to the economic problems facing his country.<sup>9</sup> European immigration as panacea was also a popular idea among Argentine romantic liberals like Esteban Echeverría and Sarmiento.

**WOMEN.** Young women students should be less oppressed by dormitory regulations, Martí insists. Otherwise, they may instill oppressive, fearful obedience in their children, which can only nurture hypocrites and despots. (p 29) The future apostle of Cuban independence proves to be liberal not only in politics, but also in mores.

**AGRICULTURE VS. INDUSTRY.** In the long debate between liberals and conservatives in nineteenth-century Mexico, the conservative nationalist Lucas Alamán favored government intervention in stimulating native industry, while the liberal leader José María Luis Mora believed that the Mexican economy had to rely on agriculture and mining principally, not industry.<sup>10</sup> José Martí



changed his opinion on the question during his stay in Mexico. At first he argued for some protection of incipient national industry and for less dependence on mining exports. Three months later, he concluded that Mexico's future was rooted in its potential agricultural wealth, not in industry. (pp. 117-118, pp. 166-167, pp. 212-213) As on other issues, he shifted into the liberal camp, on the side of Mora and Thomas Jefferson, rather than Alamán and Alexander Hamilton.

**WORKERS AND CAPITALISM.** With great sympathy Martí publicized the goals of Mexican workers, their union meetings and strikes. But he did not call for class warfare: "El derecho del obrero no puede ser nunca el odio al capital: es la armonía, la conciliación, el acercamiento común de uno y de otro." (p. 125)

**EMERGENCY RELIEF.** During a famine caused by nature in certain parts of Mexico, Martí proposed emergency relief for the hungry by temporarily lifting the duties on imported wheat and other goods in the stricken regions. He appealed to the public: "El hogar está sin granos; ábranse al pueblo los graneros públicos." (p. 140) Nevertheless, he fell short of proposing a socialist government during 1875-1876.

**THE ENVIRONMENT.** Martí the muckraker blamed the municipal government of Mexico City for neglecting to clean up the water, the atmosphere, and the streets. He described with vivid horror how *los barrios pobres* suffered the polluted environment the most. (p. 184) Here he is reminiscent of Manuel González Prada.

**AMERICANISMO.** It was on his first visit to Mexico that José Martí published his first sentiments of *americanismo*—an enthusiasm for that which is autochthonous and authentic to Latin America rather than that which is imitative of foreign ways. He believed the character of the New World to be essentially passionate and excitable, too young to be very corrupted, (pp. 87, 82) and he captured this youthful vitality by contrasting two verbs: "la vida americana no se desarrolla, brota." (p. 27) "Brotar" is one of Martí's favorite verbs in *La clara voz de México*; everything seems to be *brotando* with youthful vitality. (Remember Martí's age: twenty-two.) Furthermore, such use of antithesis and pairing of verbs is a constant of his style through much of his life.<sup>11</sup>

*Americanismo* is translated into nationalism by the Cuban journalist in Mexico. The peculiar situation of Mexico has special needs, Martí announces,—in the economy as well as in literature. In the theater, truly Mexican themes are needed, not new forms of writing. Plays cannot be authentic on stage if Mexican society itself is imitative, given that theater holds the mirror to its epoch. (pp. 27, 168, 341-342)

Martí as a literary critic has a penchant for contrastive dichotomies. He divides theater into two categories—*comedia* and *drama*.

La comedia es la obra de accidente y de enseñanza humana, como el drama es la obra esencial que revela y prepara lo divino; aquella es de una época, y el drama es de todas. El drama es lo bello constante, y la comedia es lo verdadero accidental. (p. 325)

This smacks of beauty vs. truth, spirit vs. history, immortality vs. a finite period in time. In any case, many of his reviews of plays in Mexico City stress the lack of verisimilitude, (pp. 321, 326, 351, 364, 369, 373) as if all the plays should be judged as historically rooted *comedias* rather than divinely inspired *dramas*. The fact that one play is written in verse form, he argues, taxes the credibility of everyday scenes on the stage. (p. 326) (And what of Lope de Vega?) He implies a tension between the ineffable in poetry and the verisimilar in theater: beauty versus truth: spirit versus reason.

So much for theory; let us now turn to practice. A play written by José Martí, *Amor con amor se paga*, was staged with great success in Mexico City in December 1875. It proved to be the prelude to the most important year for stage production in nineteenth-century Mexico: 1876.<sup>12</sup> Martí was a witness and a critic of the many plays performed in that memorable year. He praised *La hija del rey*, a sensational success written by José Peón Contreras, the most famous Mexican playwright of that epoch,<sup>13</sup> now all but forgotten. On the other hand, Martí failed to even mention in his many theater reviews another sensation on stage—*Martirios del pueblo* by Alberto G. Bianchi, who wanted to expose the exploitation of the working class by the government.<sup>14</sup> The playwright was imprisoned.<sup>15</sup> Martí's conspicuous silence on the controversial event suggests the degree to which he wished to shield the liberal government of President Lerdo de Tejada from criticism. So much for practice; let us return to theory.

Martí's predilection for contrastive dichotomy is evident in his theory which posits two types of poets. There are the tormented rebels, those who will not resign to the limitations of life in flesh and blood; and there are the "simpáticos espíritus" who sing of pure and delicate sentiments and acquiesce to life. In a word, *fierezas* vs. *lágrimas*. Among the rebels he names Shakespeare and Leopardi; among the "simpáticos espíritus", a minor Cuban poet named Antenor Lescano. (p. 179) A more contemporary antithesis with the same gist might be Miguel de Unamuno versus Juan Ramón Jiménez.

Martí's critique of two Cuban poetesses fits quite well into his general dichotomy of the rebels and the *espíritus simpáticos*. "[Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda no sintió el dolor humano: era más alta y más potente que él: su pesar era una roca: el de Luisa Pérez, una flor. Violeta casta, nelumbio quejumbroso, pasionaria triste." (p. 174) He adds that Luisa Pérez felt *lágrimas*, while Avellaneda felt *fierezas*, thus unmistakably linking these concrete portraits to his theoretical dichotomy. Martí brings out the contrast in two poetesses by attributing a masculine quality to the poetry of Avellaneda and a feminine touch to that of Luisa Pérez: "Lo plácido y lo altivo: alma de hombre y alma de mujer: rosa erguida y nelumbio quejumbroso: delicadísimo nelumbio!" (p. 174) Without the aid of a single verb, statically like painting, the metaphors turn women into flowers—man into nature.

José Martí turns nature into man and woman in one poignant letter, indulging his love of contrasts:

Gocé así la alborada, y después vino el sol a quitar casi todos sus encantos al paisaje, beso ardiente de hombre que interrumpe un despertar voluptuoso de

mujer. El ópalo es más bello que el brillante. Manuel debía copiar estos paisajes; él que siente el contraste con vigor de sol y capricho femenino, y que sabe el color del alma y del cuerpo, escribiría bien la Naturaleza en su paleta;—como escribiéndolo a V., haría yo a mi vez libro ejemplar.<sup>16</sup>

Masculine and feminine, light and twilight, diamond and opal, soul and body: the dichotomies are fused into one magnificent metaphor with a wealth of interplay on four levels. The chromatic symbolism and the transposition of painting into literature are reminiscent of the French Parnassian school of poetic sensibility.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Enrique Anderson Imbert considers Martí's literary use of paintings, sculptures, precious stones, and *objets d'art* to be pioneering in the *modernista* literature of the Spanish language.<sup>18</sup>

Martí conceived the metaphoric description of dawn on the road through Orizaba, Mexico, while he fled from Mexico City en route to Havana. Porfirio Díaz had replaced Lerdo de Tejada as President after a *golpe militar*, so the Cuban genius went into political exile from his adopted country, back to his native isle.

A few conclusions can be reached about Martí's essay from Mexico. Concerning politics, his ideas paralleled to a large degree those of the liberals then in power. His friendship with the Mexican politician, Manuel Mercado, undoubtedly influenced him in this regard. Concerning literary structure and literary criticism, the Cuban Orestes displayed a marked preference for sharp contrasts and dichotomies, which suited his dramatic, romantic temperament. Indeed, the young Martí in Mexico fits very well the nineteenth-century idea of Victor Hugo and Esteban Echeverría that romanticism and liberalism are complementary aspects of the same intellectual attitude, yet it would be excessive to apply this definition to all Spanish American romantics and liberals.

Martí's romantic strain does not disappear in his later, mature writings. In the famous essay of 1891, "Nuestra América", he invokes "las naciones románticas del continente"<sup>19</sup> in a spiritual rapture of *americanismo*, totally opposed to Sarmiento's desire to imitate Europe and the United States. Many elements of his mature style (including syntax and punctuation) can already be detected at the ages of twenty-two and twenty-three, although Manuel Pedro González points out that José Martí enters into his most original, his *modernista* stage the following year, in 1877.<sup>20</sup> A blossoming *modernismo* embellishes—it does not supplant—his deep-rooted romanticism. One sometimes forgets the deep roots of a tree flowering in springtime, captivated by the beauty of its crowning glory.

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## NOTES

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