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[Translated essay]

Cuban literature since 1923. Defense of the national identity

La literatura cubana a partir de 1923. Defensa de la identidad nacional

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ABSTRACT

Over time, Cuba became home to diverse ethnic components that arrived indistinctly and allowed cultures and languages to interact. In this context, a transcultural process was developing, giving rise in the 19th century to the conformation of a literature which, although in its beginnings it made use of models borrowed from Europe, this did not prevent it from reflecting its own

reality, establishing marked differences between colony and metropolis and developing a creation in correspondence with the historical moments up to the 20th century. This essay deals with the role played by Cuban lyric poetry in the defense of cultural identity from 1923 onwards, a year in which an anti-imperialist conscience germinates and a period in which the political vanguard and the artistic avant-garde march together.

Keywords: Cuba; cultural identity; Latin America literature; national literature; poetry

RESUMEN

Cuba se convirtió a lo largo del tiempo en hogar de diversos componentes étnicos que llegaron indistintamente y fueron permitiendo un interactuar de culturas y lenguas. En medio de este contexto, se va gestando un proceso transculturativo, para dar lugar en el siglo XIX a la conformación de una literatura, que, si bien en sus inicios se valió de modelos prestados de Europa, esto no impidió que reflejara una realidad propia, estableciendo marcadas diferencias entre colonia y metrópoli y desarrollando una creación en correspondencia con los momentos históricos hasta llegar al siglo XX. El presente ensayo aborda el papel que juega la lírica cubana en la defensa de la identidad cultural a partir de 1923, año en que una conciencia antimperialista germina y período en el que vanguardia política y vanguardia artística marchan unidas.

Palabras clave: Cuba; identidad cultural; literatura latinoamericana; literatura nacional; poesía

Introduction

The decade of the 1920s represented a moment of ferment for Cuban literature, as a result of the socio-political context the island was going through, and in which Cuban poetry became a way to build and defend the country's cultural identity. Therefore, it is necessary to interpret the forms of preservation and defense of that cultural identity through the work of different Cuban poets in the period from 1923 to 1950.

This literary generation and its poetic production cannot be understood without taking into account its strong political vocation, its revisionist and combative positions (Fernández Retamar, 2010). Following the postulates of Pierre



Bourdieu's sociology of literature (1990, p. 10), A research within the field of the sociology of art and literature:

... has as its object not only the material production of the work, but also the production of the value of the work, or what is the same, of the belief in the value of the work [...] it must consider as contributors to the production not only the direct producers of the work in its materiality [...] but also the producers of the meaning and value of the work and the whole set of agents who concur in the production of consumers apt to know and recognize the work of art as such.

For this reason, it is considered of vital importance to interpret the role of lyric poetry in the construction of a discourse on the cultural identity of the nation, based on the positions that each of the analyzed poets takes within the field of literary and political discourse, understanding that in these moments artistic and cultural vanguard go hand in hand.

Discussion

Brief historical sketch

The Spanish-American war pitted Spain and the United States against each other in 1898, both fighting for controlling the island. The 20th century opened with the establishment of the Republic and with it the imposition of American lifestyles. Investments began in the main branches of the economy: coffee, tobacco, mining and sugar, to which other sectors were added, which together with the signing of the main treaties accentuated the subordination to imperialist interests. During this stage, movements showing the organization of the working class and the student body in the struggle appeared, assuming radical positions that try to go to the bottom of the existing problems and with it the different artistic manifestations are going to contribute to the defense of the Cuban cultural identity.

The 20th century and the implementation of laws and treaties that subjugated the island, left behind the independence ideals for which the Cubans had fought during the Ten Years War and the War of 95, a new reality was opening and with it the anxieties continue to obtain the total independence.

The Republic represented for Cuba a period of ups and downs and, above all, of great political, economic and social instability, which at the same time became a propitious ground for literary and artistic creation.

From 1923 onwards, a new movement for the dignification of national life rapidly turned into a general uprising. In this new stage, leaders such as Mella, Villena and Guiteras, stood out, leading events of great significance. The period began with the Protest of the Thirteen, and continuing with the struggles for the University Reform, the Foundation of the University Student Federation, the First National Congress of Students, the Foundation of the Popular University “José Martí” and “The Anti-imperialist League”, to provide a few examples.

Parallel to the student movement, the workers organized themselves and gained strength; in 1924 they founded the “*Hermanidad Ferroviaria*” (Railway Brotherhood), the 2nd National Workers Congress was held, the National Workers Confederation of Cuba, and in 1925, the constitution of the Communist Party of Cuba, by Carlos Baliño and Julio A. Mella.

On March 10, 1952, after the mandate of Gerardo Machado and the One Hundred Days Government, Fulgencio Batista ascends to power through a coup d'état. In the midst of it, a group of young people are nucleated around the figure of the young lawyer Fidel Castro, aspiring not only to overthrow the tyranny, but also to carry out deep transformations that will change the panorama of the island.

The most advanced ideas and actions were developed in the political, social and artistic fields, characterized by the search for a new art, the rescue of identity and the fight against the *descubanización* (“uncubanization”), carried out by intellectuals from positions of definite conscience of the social role of culture or from a conceptualization of culture as a totalizing phenomenon.

Towards 1910, a movement of poetic renovation is going to take place, not in the capital, but in the former *Oriente* province, also in Matanzas and Las Villas. Boti, with *Arabescos mentales* (1913), and Poveda, with *Versos Precursores* (1917), would be the managers of this movement. To them *Ala* (1915), by Agustín Acosta, can be added, with a marked modernist influence. Boti and Poveda were the true initiators and promoters of postmodernism in Cuba, a channel chosen by several authors to express their disappointment before a frustrated Republic. Although



they apparently pursued the form of beauty and advocated elitism, they were rebels conscious of the historical moment (Romero, 2003).

Within the poetry of this first period, the verses of Bonifacio Byrne, 1898, as cited by López Lemus, 1999, p. 129), stand out, which expressed:

Returning from a distant shore/ with a mournful and somber soul/ I
searched anxiously for my flag/ and I have seen another flag besides my
own! [...] With the faith of austere souls, / today I hold with deep energy, /
that two flags should not float / where one is enough; mine!

With this poem the author bequeaths a composition that becomes a forerunner of the social poetry that will take shape after 1923 with greater force. In each of these verses is present, above all, the poetic expression of the desire for independence: "If torn into tiny pieces / Becomes my flag someday.../ Our dead raising their arms / Will still know how to defend it!..." (Byrne, 1898, as quoted by López Lemus, 1999, p. 130).

"*Mi Bandera*" (My Flag) was the expression of the most radical stance against the neocolonialist operations of the nascent Yankee Empire. Byrne, in the opinion of García Ronda (n.d.), as cited by Téllez Villalón (2022); "knew that, although Yankee domination would accelerate the modernization of the Island, the price was the loss of freedom" (para. 22).

From 1923 onwards, the existing rebelliousness gained political-intellectual expression through four movements that showed the existing nonconformity: *Minorismo* (1923-1927), the vanguardism of the magazine *Avances* (1927-1930), *negrismo* (1928), and the triumph of social art (1930-1934).

Encouraged by innovative attitudes characteristic of the artistic avant-garde, intellectuals and creators, who shared the same attitude of rejection of the injustice of the national reality, formed associations, parties, as well as institutions to define their positions, and to this is added the proliferation of various publications responsible for disseminating the literary work of the time.

The first and most important was the *Grupo Minorista* (1923-1928), which emerged informally from meetings held at *Café Martí*, headed by Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, and whose members presented a political and ideological background with ideas far removed from conventional artistic opinions. These



ideas, disseminated through various publications including the magazine *Social*, were aimed more at social projection, which took precedence over aesthetic ideas.

In 1927, *Revista de Avance* (1927-1930) appeared in the midst of a convulsive period, in this year Villena made the declaration of the *Grupo Minorista* and directed the magazine "*América Latina*" (Latin America). The verses of Regino Pedroso appeared; Navarro Luna published his book "*Surco*" (Furrow); "*Juan Criollo*" by Carlos Loveira appeared; "*Coaybay*" by José A. Ramos; and, in the midst of this panorama, the magazine *Avance* (Advancement) solidifies the struggle against false values, influencing the literary and artistic process, but also promoting political and social concerns.

The existing rebelliousness in the country is also manifested in musical works such as: "*Siboney*", "*Arrullo de palma*" (Palm Cooin), "*La Comparsa*". The search of our essences began in Cuban songwriting. On the other hand, the first collective painting exhibition of 1927 marked the beginning of a period of formal search with the assimilation of elements of the European vanguards, but with the distinctive seal of projecting for the rescue of the national.

Rubén Martínez Villena

The figure of a young poet gains strength not only in the political struggle but also in literary creation, Rubén Martínez Villena, who, with his poem "*Mensaje lírico-civil*" (Lyrical-civil Message) (1923), reflects the culmination of a process of vital dissatisfaction with the world.

The fundamental importance of this poem lies in the fact that it marks the beginning of Villena's career as an activist, his "taking a stand", as well as the official founding date of the *Grupo Minorista*, recognized by the author himself almost ten years later in his "*Manifiesto Minorista*" of 1927.

The place he occupies in literature and politics is the result of a series of personal circumstances: the son of a professor at the University of Havana, he began to write at a very young age and became interested in literature. He awakens his political conscience through the influence of the friendships he makes while working in the office of Fernando Ortíz, ethnologist of the processes of



transculturation in the construction of the Cuban identity (Quintana Suárez and Herrera Martín, 2011).

The content of "*Mensaje lírico-civil*" is intrinsically related to the socio-political panorama and constitutes in itself a manifesto of protest, particularly as a materialization of the "*Protesta de los Trece*" (Protest of the Thirteen).

Written as a letter addressed to Peruvian poet José Torres Vidaurre, who, in the 1920s, visited the island and came into contact with avant-garde poets, the poem expresses the protest against the sale of the Santa Clara Convent, making a veiled description of the events, and relating the fact not only as an act of corruption, but also as a consequence of U.S. interventionism: "our Cuba, you well know how prone it is to the hunting/ of nations, and how it endures/ the permanent threat from the North that its ambition incubates" (Martínez Villena, 1960, p. 176).

The description of Cuba's colonial status vis-à-vis the United States is used by Martínez Villena to establish a link of identity with South America, and is the note with which he begins the poem. Villena uses the feeling of the other, in force in everything that represents the North American presence, to build an "us" in a reactive way, which would erase in one stroke the differences that divided Cuban society.

He takes the opportunity to criticize the government of the day, as vassals who work on behalf of other homelands:

We have our destiny in our own hands / And it is the sad thing that it is we, the Cubans, / Who will achieve the probable misfortune, / Adulterating, infamous, the noble Democracy (...) There is false patriotism, of glitter and pomp, / with, accompaniment of timpani and horn (...). (Martínez Villena, 1960, p. 176-177).

The poem once again evokes the idea of the betrayal of the political elites, a fact that at the same time reflects the position of those sectors of Cuban society as external agents, enemies.

In general, during most of the poem's development, the way in which it plays with concrete facts and links them to an event and a feeling that appeals to Cubans first, in their situation as a nation that needs to defend itself based on a past and

a common enemy, stands out: “But where do we march to, forgetting everything:/ History, Honor and People, on muddy roads (...)” (Martínez Villena, 1960, p. 176-177).

It is a poem in defense of Cuban sovereignty, where patriotic feelings are appealed to in terms of a sense of belonging based on a common past, as well as a feeling of indignation and bravery as constituents of national identity.

Finally, and in its most lyrical moments, the poem concludes with a call for direct action and revolutionary uprising: “It takes a charge to kill rascals, / to finish the work of revolutions; (...) so that the Republic will keep itself, / to fulfill the marble dream of Martí; (...)” (Martínez Villena, 1960, p. 178-179).

In these lines the references to the figure of José Martí stand out. The call to combat and self-determination in Villena are a reflection of the ideas expressed by Martí himself in “*Nuestra América*” (Our America): “These times are not for going to bed with a handkerchief on one's head, but with arms on one's pillow...” (Martí, 2010 [1831], p. 133). Perhaps this mention can be interpreted as part of the efforts of the Cuban intelligentsia to recover and preserve the image of Martí as the Cuban intellectual, who defended an America free from the foreign yoke, and with whom the group identifies itself, to the point of being assumed as the “shadow of Martí” (Roig de Leuchsenring, 1961, p. 32).

In itself, the poem is representative of the intellectual elite (not of the official intelligentsia, since we are talking about the “heretical” avant-garde) in effervescence at the University of Havana, which tries to build a sense of identity based on an ideology conscious of the processes of its society, and a narrative that responds to the moment it is living.

However, this would not be the only poem that the author dedicated to the theme of identity and the Cuban nation. His “*Mensaje lírico-civil*” was preceded by a series of poems dating back to 1919, which, despite their romantic tone and far from patriotic clarity, we can already observe the references that merge in the “Message”.

Such is the case of “*19 de mayo*” (May 19th), an elegy to José Martí, full of almost messianic allusions: “Lord of the Word, leader of the Idea (...) the redeemed people are on their knees: / Your sacred memory brings them to their knees

again!" (Martínez Villena, 1960, p. 168). Once again, he presents a lyricism alien to his later political career, but which refers to the image of Cuba and its revolutionary past. The theme, although with different figures and referring to different historical moments, continues throughout poems such as "*El rescate de Sanguily*" (The rescue of Sanguily), "*Maltiempo*", or "*San Pedro*".

Already in his social activist stage and almost completely abandoned from poetic creation, he writes: "*A una cubana*" (To a Cuban lady) (1929), a small poem, but of great anti-imperialist vehemence: "*Cubana, stay faithful:/ Tell the intruding foreigner/ That the tariff he put on us/ We violated it with your honey*" (Martínez Villena, 1960, p. 165).

Thus, the sense of the defense of the Cuban identity in Rubén Martínez Villena's work is projected along two fundamental axes: on the one hand, the denunciation, rejection and opposition to the occupation of external forces in Cuba; on the other hand, a nationalism based on the recreation of a heroic past and resistance, and on the allusion to abstract constructions as ideals and values of Cubanness is exalted.

With his sublime words he knew how to lead the masses along the paths of Marxism-Leninism and with his firm pen, far from any stain and lie, he revolutionized poetry with his own style, breaking with the old and obsolete canons of 19th century poetry and writing for the rights of the workers, demanding the social justice that this deceived and humiliated proletariat deserved. It was this young man and no other, this young man with a penetrating gaze, capable of upsetting and impressing with it, one of the most worthy heroes that our homeland could have. (Tenreiro Moreno, 2018, p. 9).

The so-called social poetry is an expressive complex that was not born in the 1920s, if we take into account that, in the finisecular years of the previous century, it can be identified in Luaces, the poets of the war, Martí himself, and later in Byrne and others who write anti-hierarchical poetry (López Lemus, 1999). The 20th century gives continuity to all this poetry, now under new historical circumstances, making the defense of the roots and the opposition to the North

American intervention a reality, under the pen of poets like Regino Pedroso or Manuel Navarro Luna.

Regino Pedroso

The case of Regino Pedroso, a Matanzas native of Afro-Chinese origin, is further evidence of the importance of the countryside as a constituent space of the work of art, which gives it meaning and establishes it as such. Pedroso is, in many ways, a marginal agent in the field of art and culture, as well as in the social sense, at the moment when his work becomes important in the milieu. His life of deprivation was marked by his early departure from elementary school, by the death of his mother, and by his beginnings in the sugar mills doing all kinds of jobs.

Pedroso uses his self-taught education to get in touch with the intellectual avant-garde through the meetings at *Café Martí*, where he meets the “flame of warm humanity” of Martínez Villena and others (Pedroso, 1972).

It would be the publication in the *Diario la Marina* of his “*Salutación fraterna al taller mecánico*” (Fraternal greetings to the mechanical workshop) (1927), accompanied by a critical commentary by Rubén Martínez Villena, the poem that would draw attention to his figure, besides making him the first poet to introduce the factory, the workshop and the proletarian demands to the field of literature (Quintana, 2003).

The ode dedicated to the mechanical workshop, would put him in relation to the field of literature as someone who despite his origins was at the forefront with the intellectual habitus. The poem is of primordial importance in the struggle for the defense of an identity that placed as a central axis those strata from which Pedroso came as a constituent part of life on the island.

In the poem we find all the elements that prelude “*Nosotros*” (Us): the sensualist, realistic representation of concrete events. Its theme, not sung in Cuban lyric poetry at the time, recalls Whitman and the sensualism of the Italian futurists, particularly Marinetti and his “*Aeropoea*” (idem: 327-328): “Oh, workshop, iron ovary of production! You gasp/ like a great thorax that tires! (Pedroso, 2004, p. 121).

However, his poetry stands out less for its references to machines in correspondence with the new ideals of modernity, but rather establishes a relationship between the machine and the proletarian. As the poem progresses, it is perceived that the author understands that the machine is the slave of the same silent injustices of the worker: "I know your perennial pain, / I know your human anxiety, / I know how long centuries of ergastula have made you/ an acratia conscience (Pedroso, 2004, p. 121).

This humanization of the contents of his lyrics lead him to observe injustice from a humanist point of view, not necessarily patriotic, but rather in a more "universal" sense, we are before the beginning of social poetry: "I greet you in a cry of equal human anguish! (...) / Or are you also a temple/ of love, of faith, of intense ideological yearnings / and communion of races...?" (Pedroso, 2004, p. 123).

Although the poem expresses the amazement before the machine, here it does not only sing to the machinery of the factories, but also appeals to other values. It is the factory where all races are present and converge in an identification, human love, solidarity, the struggle against injustice; pain then becomes the creed of the ideological principles of men in the face of the exploitation they suffer. It is to the rhythm of the machines in which these men also feed their dreams and hopes that unites all men. It is inside the factory world that we hear the cries of the exploited, but also their yearning for struggle. It is not the pure song to the machine, to the modern, it is the machinery witness of a time of exploitation of the worker, the fatigue of long hours; it is the machinery that contributes to the brotherhood.

The few lines he dedicates to matters that concern Cuba more directly are reflected in "*Los Conquistadores*" (The Conquerors) (1927), where we find the relationship between oppressed and oppressors, and a subdued nation:

"In the name of right and peace they came.
They went to the peoples calling them brothers:
and as in the Scripture, America was the Christ
that saw them divide their lands for clothes,
and cast their lot in the free tunic of their destiny.
They passed by.



They came with a name of new democracy:
And up to the high peaks of the Andes they slept
under a heavy brutal sleep of bayonets!" (Santos, 2021, para. 6)

On this occasion, Regino Pedroso gives a biblical aura to the mismatch of the subjugation of the American peoples. A direct comparison is established between the story of the conquest and the description of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel of John, resorting to cultural symbols that transcend the Cuban identity and once again reveal the poet's humanist inspiration. The author refers to the symbol of the conquest and the imaginary around it to assimilate it to his denunciation of the "new conquest". This time by those who promised law, peace and democracy, as argued by the Monroe Doctrine.

His work also includes the Afro-Cuban theme, in terms of denouncing the exploitation to which blacks were subjected. In this line, "*Hermano negro*" ("Black Brother") stands out above all, from his "*Antología*" (Antology) (1939): "And is it just because of your skin? is it just because of color? / It's not just because of color, it's because you are, / under the prejudice of race, / exploited man" (Miranda, 2018, p.1).

Poems such as the above or even "*Salutación a un camarada culí*" (Salutation to a Culi Comrade), work around racial themes, but concord and the notion of empathy are always established as a function of social position:

My destiny is sadder than yours; / that even the Indian land to whose sun
I have opened myself/ and the first breeze I have drunk, from Rio Grande
to Tierra del Fuego/ -continental homeland-/ is also destroyed by
imperialism. (Pedroso, 2004, p. 40).

Pedroso's work is characterized by its originality in every sense, reflecting a social and intellectual origin very different from that of most of the representatives of the intellectual field at the time. This origin establishes from the beginning a very different perspective, aims and scope in his poetry. The author is interested in representing the struggles of the most disadvantaged classes of society; but his commitment is to an ideal of human dignity and welfare that is contemplated beyond purely political or ideological distinctions.

Manuel Navarro Luna

“Man of very rich sensibility and to whom nothing human is foreign” is how Juan Marinello Vidaurreta refers to Manuel Navarro Luna (Navarro, 1963, p. 5). Born in 1894 in Jovellanos, Matanzas, he belonged to a family of scarce resources, situation that takes him to abandon his studies being very young. This did not prevent him from becoming, through a self-taught education, a respected writer of the avant-garde (Quintana Suárez and Herrera Martín 2011).

It is worth noting that the literary avant-garde was content with exalting the desire for freedom in the face of the political-ideological problems of the moment that plagued Cuban society. The lyricism of Navarro's metaphysical and almost mystical tones is striking, who also introduces a new theme to the dialogue of social poetry: the countryside and its people (Quintana, 2003).

The expression, “The peasant's writer” allows us to define the object and the posture from which he approaches his works. From a young age, he sought freedom and dignity for the marginal classes, to which he himself belonged, and through “the creation of somber atmospheres, the use of words whose semantic spectrum refers to ideas of pain, darkness, death, struggles, heartbreak” (Quintana, 2003, p. 205), allow access to the reality of the Cuban countryside. His important role within the literary group of Manzanillo in 1921, was a key factor for his works to reach a wider diffusion.

In *Surco* (1928), he recognizes the responsibility of encouraging the oppressed people in the obligation to fight for their welfare as the only symbol of dignity. With “*Estación terminal*” (Terminal Station) he introduces the panorama of social poetry, with a very distinguished component of class-consciousness: “(...) In them (the first class cars) go the rich/ those who can, the privileged ones. / The other passengers/ always travel in third class cars/ or in the cargo car which is the common/ grave/” (Quintana, 2003, p. 306).

By 1929, with the experience he had gained as an organizer of anti-imperialist strikes against the repression and abuses of the masses by the government of Gerardo Machado, he published a series of poems under the title “*Pulso y onda*” (Pulse and Wave). The poems acquire a tone of defense of the peasant's identity without leaving aside the injustices and barbarities he suffers.

The arduous work, under the burning flames of the sun, is compensated with death and hunger. "*Canción de la noche abrasada*" (Song of the Scorched Night) portrays the naivety and innocence of the peasant children in the face of their circumstances. "His bones were burning too, his bones; but he felt nothing. His little bones creaked, too, in the water. But he played with laughter", (...) "Sickly children have more strength than men. They resist hot water better" (Navarro, 1963, p. 17-18).

"*Canción campesina para cantarla en la ciudad*" (Peasant song to be sung in the city) exalts the goodness of the countryside as an idyllic place. This contrasts with the sterility of the city, its dirt and heaviness: "The peasant's song/ -spirit agile and clear-/ pecks the golden fruit of the sun/ -that the morning-/ serves her, diligent/ at the clean table of the tree." (Navarro, 1963, p. 24).

Following an almost Rousseauian thought, the peasant man appears, strong, tanned by work and noble, characteristics of a hard and difficult life. Then: "Silence contracts the tanned muscles of his face; but he does not stop hoeing / (...) Bring all the words you find lost; all the cries you find helpless, / (...) But do not bring the peasant silence because he is working!" (Navarro, 1963, p. 25-26). Navarro Luna's effort is part of a renewal movement that sought to highlight the provinces' right to a voice in the face of what was considered contempt and commiseration on the part of Havana's intellectual elite. The best vehicle they could use to reject this subaltern position was precisely to highlight those characteristics that distinguished them from the city, in a discourse that would turn the meaning of "civilized and backward" upside down (Fernández Pequeño, 1987, p. 1).

This sense of solidarity in the face of pain is commonly used by the author, who, through the creation of cold atmospheres of death, blood, mystery and darkness, refers to the reality of a sector of the population not only oppressed, but abandoned to their fate. Thus we see in "*Levanta los ojos*" (Raise your Eyes): "These voices lost in the darkness of the earth! / this frayed cry over vanquished dreams (...) And this fallen pain / that takes refuge in the awakened furrows! (Navarro, 1963, p. 34).

Six years later, "*Tierra herida*" (Wounded Land) (1936) appears, where he captures the tragedy in its maximum splendor, and he knew how to reach the ears of the people with his words. He sings fervently to those who face the daily trauma of death, and who feel identified by social conflicts. "*Canto a la agonía*" (Song to the Agony) and "*Canto de los surcos*" (Song of the Furrows) show with words the precarious life they were forced to endure: (...) The peasant dies...! / Without light, / without bread, / without clean water...! (...) They rise in the furrows trembling with remorse, the skulls of the children who died without knowing they were children (...)! (Navarro, 1963, p. 53-55).

The poet has witnessed every existing misfortune in the land he loves most. "*Canto de las sombras*" (Song of the Shadows) is to cry out in anger at the anguish, anger and despair of the Cuban land who was prey to the American conquerors bearers of chains and death: "(...) The white caravels destroyed the light...! (...) The white caravels destroyed the light...! (...) to the new shore of the world standards of the plague dragged to the new shore of the world by the prows of martyrdom (...)!" (Marinello Vidaurreta, 1963, p. 58-59).

"*El Canto de las azadas*" (The Song of Hoes) becomes the song of liberation of this wounded land that dreams of its freedom, in which everyone will be able to rest someday even if it is after life: "(...) the black child and the white child will jump over the joy of the roads and will sink their hands in springs of stars, while they run among the lilies of the redeemed song/ they will be able to laugh! / they will be able to sing...! / they will be able to live...! (...)!" (Marinello Vidaurreta, 1963, p. 62).

Navarro Luna's tone starts as a call from the periphery that represents the Cuban countryside, and also serves as a wake-up call to intellectuals to look again to what constitutes the roots and the heart of the island as a country. He sang to the countryside from the countryside, denounced the reality of the peasantry through his pen and became a defender of the Cuban nationality.

Eliseo Diego

During the forties, three important groups appeared: Group *Gente Nueva* (New People) of the Spanish-Cuban Cultural Institution, Group *Acento* (Accent) and Group *Orígenes* (Origins). The latter, organized around José Lezama Lima, had



a very important transcendence and many of the works highlight the interest of its members in the renovation of poetics and culture in general, they sought the integration of an identity based on culture and an essence outside of political frustration.

Some of its members were Angel Castelo, Virgilio Piñero, Justo Rodríguez Santos, and later Fina García Marruz, Eliseo Diego, Cintio Vitier, guided by the figure of José Lezama Lima. *Orígenes* was preceded by *Verbum* (1937), *Espuela de Plata* (1939-1941), *Clavileño* (1941-1943), *Nadie Parecía* (1942-1944), *Poeta* (1942-1943); to finally derive, in 1944, in this magazine also encouraged by Father Angel Gaztelu, who facilitated the recurrent meeting of those intellectuals. The poet Eliseo Diego, born in Havana in 1920, 10 years after José Lezama Lima, the group's main mentor, was part of *Orígenes*, but this did not prevent him from being attracted by his teaching; both shared the word as a testimony of a surrounding reality.

In 1949 his first book of poems "*En la calzada de Jesús del Monte*" (On Jesus del Monte Drive) was published, and already here he leaves the recurrent centers of his poetry: intimacy, memory and daily life. This enormous roadway to which the poet sings, in the reality of Havana is the *Calzada 10 de Octubre* (October 10th Drive), which Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring defines as:

What is today *Calzada de Jesús del Monte*, or rather *Avenida de Diez de Octubre*, was nothing more than a stretch of the road that led to the very small towns of Santiago de las Vegas and Bejucal, and which was, in the early days, the only one that left the city and entered the countryside. (Roig de Leuchsenring, 1963, p. 17).

About the origin of the book of poems, the author himself expresses:

At last, one day, one morning, I accompanied my mother to that kind of health association that existed then, which was called the Catholic Ladies, and which was in the Cerro. While I was there, waiting for my mother, I saw a streetcar going down the *Calzada de Jesús del Monte*, and the first verses of the book came to my mind. (Diego, 2010, p. 117).

The roadway is not only the scenario in which his childhood takes place, but it is also a witness of the passing of life, in which time erases everything, shaping a

distant universe, which the poet tries to rescue. Perhaps this loss of childhood associated with Eden is in correspondence with a bleak, desolate and hopeless present.

In this collection of poems appear the main thematic lines that will later be present throughout his books: Childhood associated with the loss of paradise, of which only memories remain, time that runs swiftly tearing apart what it finds in its path, death seen as something of which we already have an idea and that sometimes inspires respect, but in others is treated with a fine irony, memory in charge of rescuing all our past, the historical and poetic creation as a way to materialize their concerns, among others.

But above all these lines will be in close correspondence with the defense of one's own roots, remembering people, places, customs, naming the buildings that resist the passage of time and that show an architecture in correspondence with the characteristics of the island, demonstrate Diego's work to contribute to the preservation of memory. Perhaps because of his own affiliation, he did not fully understand the moments of revolutionary effervescence that were being lived. Perhaps he did not understand that the destiny of the country required a radical change that would only be achieved with a revolution like the one led by the young lawyer Fidel Castro. However, he did understand that poetry should play an important role, that it was necessary to preserve and defend our identity and that he achieved it simply with the act of creation.

Referring to the historical period that was lived in an unpublished interview conducted by Yamile Arrieta Rodríguez, in 1987, Diego expressed:

"At that time, the group of poets who made the magazine *"Orígenes"*, without proposing it, without having a plan, but each one by his own way trying to save in poetry some of the essences of our country: the Cuban, that is what I saw that was unraveling in front of my eyes (...) And later (...) but at least in the office that corresponded to me I tried to save some of the Cuban essences". (Diego, personal communication, 1987).

We are not facing the enormous roadway from a contemplative attitude; it is the roadway that comes to life, where not only goes to the rescue of the past, but also returns the gaze to the present. The poems that integrate it, arise from the

daily life of the man-poet with the nearby world that is transforming his look, to the anguish of man in the face of loneliness. The memory will be in function of unveiling the urban environment, going through a disconcerting present (difficult decade of the 40's), and a past through which parade the republican frustration, the presence of the father and the beings that make up the life of the place.

Thus, "*La Muchacha*" (The Young Lady) poses the sensation of desired permanence, which offers the relief of being able to be contemplated, lacking movement, but present. And at the same time the Cuban aspect emerges when comparing her youth with the splendor and beauty of the palms that populate our fields: "To look at her is like looking at a palm, / Slender young mother / and Creole blessing of the diaphanous nights" (Diego, 1947, p. 63).

In the poem "*Voy a nombrar las cosas*" (I will name things), designate becomes the precise word; he makes an inventory of the spaces (penumbras, places of stones, windows) and matters (dust, wind, fire) that dignify the roadway and at the same time make it transcend "Similar to the Lord's Prayer/ whose words are numbered, but suddenly never happen again" (Diego, 1947, p. 32). It is a poem in which the need to enumerate the values, the memories, the family, the Cuban architecture that is now also dressed in sadness is present, therefore he expresses:

The deep portals, the screens / closed to the shadow and silence; but also the memory of his father that will be reiterated in other poems associated with the current poverty: And the poverty of the place, and the dust / in which they tested the footprints of my father. (Diego, 1947, p. 32).

Naming then is an act of reaffirmation, reaffirmation of what is proper, of what is Cuban that will always be present, reaffirmation of what is national, reaffirmation of the passage of man: "And I will name things so slowly/ that when I lose the paradise of my street/ and my forgetfulness turns it into dreams/ I can call them suddenly with the dawn" (Diego, 1947, p. 33).

His poem "*El sitio en que tan bien se está*" (The Place where it is so good to be), is much more than a battle between life/death, it goes to the presence of the grandmother distant in time, but present in the memory, the republican frustration and that inability of the poet who lives it to simply pronounce: the Republic, the

customs and beliefs rooted in the families: "(...) she always/ said it: cover the mirrors/ that death presumes (...)" (Diego, 1947, p. 78). The portals, so characteristic of colonial architecture, that provide a space to protect from the sun, the rain and even to walk under them in some cases and that endure over the years, deserve mention by the poet associated not only with architecture, but as a symbol of friendship, invitation, shelter, the solidarity of the Cuban: "You had the portal/ wide, frank, as commanded,/ as a generous/ word: come in-rest. (...)" (Diego, 1947, p. 82).

The republic associated with death appears as a ghost (but one that exists, that lives) and in a sarcastic tone the poet refers to it:

Against the rain the Republic, / against malaria who else but the Republic,
/ in favor of the widows/ and the Rural against all sorts of ghosts: / do not
be afraid, sir, it is us, sleep, / do not be afraid of dying, / against
nothingness will be the Republic (...). (Diego, 1947, p. 82).

In a talk offered under the title "*A través de mi espejo*" (Through my mirror), the poet explained:

I believe that in it [In the *Calzada*] the frustration of the country in those years is quite well reflected: "[...] Let it be known that that was a time of diabolical farce, where teachers were merchants, policemen, thieves; rulers, puppets; and the nation itself, a tragic comedy. (Diego, 2007, p. 262).

The republic associated with the memory of his father, for whom it meant: "the soft, wide, sacred / woman who gave him children". But at the same time the poet establishes a feeling of nostalgia, pain, uneasiness that does not allow him to pronounce this name as his father would and then: "I, who do not know how to say it: the Republic" (Diego, 1947, p. 81).

The coffee so typical of the island that Cubans taste in small quantities, but very loaded, makes an appearance in this poem; that coffee that feeds our soul, that sometimes is enjoyed surrounded by family and friends, that coffee present at work, in the evenings, in the daily life of everyday life and that in this case reaffirms that identity: "A sip of coffee at dawn, / of black coffee, almost bitter, /



here is the greatest rest, my good friend,/ the comfortable clay where we are well” (Diego, 1947, p. 79).

And later, the coffee that he also identifies with the land that produces it: “slow steps of the dawn, that returns/ to throw us, slowly, its ash/ in our eyes, its dream, and then only a sip of coffee befriends us/ in its sweetness with the earth” (Diego, 1947, p. 80).

But even more in this poem, Diego takes us to the Greco-Latin world to allude to the Divine Comedy, that transition through hell, purgatory, to reach paradise, is the transition of this reality that is lived of poverty, widows, malaria, rural guard, etc. to have optimism in a better future, and along with all this the religious presence of Sunday, which more than a day of the week, is in which the family, seen as the center of the unity of the preservation of values, gathers and enjoys the bread.

Intertwined memory and history appear in “*El segundo discurso, aquí un momento*” (The Second Speech, here just a Moment), which goes in two directions: to the origin, searching for the past, but maintaining the relationship with the present: “I keep thinking, here my friend happening” (Diego, 1947, p. 80). The center of the poem is occupied by the man who needs to drink from the source of tradition, to go to the past, to the origins. That is why the poet goes back to distant times where the religious symbols that appear are the very men who initially populated that world: “Like Cain and Abel already face to face/ like Cain and Abel reunited in Adam” (Diego, 1947, p. 25).

He is able to identify himself with the objects of the surrounding world; which allows a reciprocal interrelation between both, man tries to resemble them, but at the same time it is as if he were inviting them to feel with him, all the inner beauty of inanimate objects: “(...) Let us hear, my street, the blow of your embrace/ strong, my dream and memory, the heart/ and poverty. The houses have gathered their harmonious sorrows” (Diego, 1947, p. 26).

From “*En la calzada de Jesús del Monte*”, the author offers a testimony arising in the midst of a decadent society. The book expresses an attitude towards the emptiness of republican life, the failure of the most cherished ideals and the confidence in a better future. The historical-social theme emerges when the

author was only 29 years old and the starting point is “*Retrato a Carlos Manuel de Céspedes*” (Portrait to Carlos Manuel de Céspedes). It is to remember our past, the man who gave the cry of independence and gave his life for a just cause. On the other hand, in “*Los portales, la noche*” (The Portals, the Night), going to the origin means the search for the past. That is why he starts from Rome, owner of the world for years and that, despite its fall, bequeathed a whole culture that makes it great; to arrive then to the conquest, that Spanish presence that in his eyes is part of our blood and culture and that upon its arrival implanted its religion, Catholicism; and contributed to the development of a transcultural process during which the Cuban culture was emerging. It shows the conquest as something that brought positive results, but at the same time sowed death. In the midst of all this, he places the family as a symbol of union, tranquility, capable of preserving customs, for a well achieved ending, in which he employs resources of Latin culture (aura, toga) where humanity is seen as the mother of the world.

When historicizing the Cuban literature of the Republic through its lyrics, the work of this author cannot be ignored, who, without making a call to armed struggle, showed his nonconformity to a period full of sadness, hardships, confrontations with the dictatorship through the word.

All literature reflects, to a greater or lesser extent, what is happening in its environment. It is good to remember this, because concepts are often isolated by emphasizing the construction of the strictly literary, a hermeneutic that sometimes further complicates understanding. (García, 2020, p. 22).

Conclusion

The Cuban literary avant-garde was born in the very bosom of the political avant-garde, with figures who militated in one or both currents, who strove as a whole to establish hegemony in the cultural field, and who also strove to erect the collective ideals that would become the symbols of civil resistance.

These poets dedicated a large part of their work and were personally involved in political movements, so their works, their content and intentions are intertwined with those of a nationalist political agenda, not abandoning the artistic avant-garde in its forms, as a vehicle for the ideas they professed. This meant that in

the period under analysis, the political avant-garde and the artistic avant-garde marched hand in hand.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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