

Cuban literature at the time of the Revolution

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ALITTLE OVER half a century after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, and if during its first few decades - for lack of a proper perspective, total ignorance or the non-disposable bad faith of its detractors - the existence of a new literature that emerged with it was a topic of frequent discussion in literary and artistic circles, today this existence is not only unquestionable but our literature, rooted in its best traditions and specificities, occupies a place of undeniable significance among Iberian-American letters.

A full understanding of the literary process in the period under analysis requires, of course, not relying exclusively on literary factors, but at least concisely dwelling in those of an extra-literary nature, which since their early years have influenced the process and contributed to its characterization. Firstly, it should be noted that although our literature has relied on writers of continental and universal relevance - such as José Martí (the highest among all), José María Heredia, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Julián del Casal, Nicolás Guillén, Alejo Carpentier, José Lezama Lima, Dulce María Loynaz, Juan Marinello, and Virgilio Piñera, among others - their extraordinary work was produced despite the material and spiritual conditions that were far from favorable to its creators. These writers stoically wrote to a national reader, who in practice did not exist. So, as unanimously recognized, the first great cultural and therefore literary achievement of the revolutionary process was the creation of a reading public, primarily through the literacy campaign successfully completed at a time so close to the Revolution as was 1961. This campaign laid the groundwork for the people, 25% of whom, according to conservative estimates, were illiterate at the time of the triumph of the Revolution, to both enjoy and create literary works. This unprecedented cultural fact on our continent led to a process of institutionalization in the area, which only when seen from our current perspective can be properly appreciated in all its uniqueness and greatness.

The 1960s witnessed the emergence, since its beginning, of institutions and agencies as important as, inter alia, the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC), Casa de las Americas, the National Council for Culture, the Institute of Literature and Linguistics, the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry (ICAIC), the National Ballet and, in particular, a large editorial system, whose biggest accomplishment was the creation of the Cuban Book

Institute in the mid of the decade, conceived by names as important as Alejo Carpentier, among others. Significantly, in the best cultural conception of Martí and Lenin, Cervantes' great novel *Don Quixote* would be the first title to come out of the revolutionary nationalized publishing companies, with a print run of 100,000 copies and at a totally affordable price for the newly created mass of readers.

Cuba was going through epic moments that inevitably demanded ideological definitions by the people and, obviously, by writers and artists, who found in Fidel Castro's flexible and far from dogmatic speeches in June 1961, collected under the title of the "Words to the Intellectuals", the first formulation of the cultural policy that would guide cultural and literary creation in a society that had already declared itself socialist.

In the strictly literary scene, those were years of enormous productivity. Creators from different generations, who for the first time in our literary history were achieving deserved social recognition for their artistic work, joined forces with new talents known in all genres. On the pages of numerous literary publications that emerged not only in the capital but, in tune with the correct cultural policy outlined, throughout the country, writers found space to publish the many creations of new the forms of aesthetic appropriation of the national reality and, from very early on, with success in different genres. Thus, already in the middle of its first decade, the narrative of the Revolution could take pride in relying on works of such impacting aesthetic quality like *El siglo de las luces* or *Paradiso*, by pre-1959 authors such as Carpentier and Lezama Lima, but also with a text like *Cimarrón*, by the young Miguel Barnet, who had just become known as a writer and with his text brilliantly introduced the testimonial genre. Important storytellers known before 1959 such as Virgilio Piñera, Onelio Jorge Cardoso, Félix Pita Rodríguez, and Dora Alonso, among others, also had the opportunity to massively publish their works for the first time and win the recognition of the people. They continued to produce with unique



Fina García Marruz

Nancy Morejón

appropriateness, while in the heat of competitions as important as those of Casa de las Americas, UNEAC and other institutions, the first generation of novelists of the time began to emerge, with authors like José Soler Puig, Lisandro Otero, Ezekiel Vieta, Edmundo Desnoes, Humberto Arenal, Jaime Sarusky, Gustavo Eguren, Pablo Armando Fernández, and Reinaldo González, among others, all committed to aesthetically shaping their experiences from the stages of both the fight against the Batista dictatorship and the early years after the Revolution. These authors would be joined, in the middle of the decade, by a group of young storytellers like Jesús Díaz, Eduardo Heras, Norberto Fuentes, Antonio Benítez Rojo, Manuel Cofiño, Joel James, Julio Travieso, and Hugo Chinaa, among others, called upon by their generation to leave an indelible mark on our narrative of tales with their freshness and proper way of capturing and expressing, with great aesthetic quality, the highest point of the Revolution.



Dora Alonso



Dulce María Loynaz

Continuing its tradition of excellence in our literary history, from 1959 onwards written poetry combined, with undoubted originality and aesthetic force, the so-called “eternal themes” with those offered by the new revolutionary reality, as uniquely illustrates, from the first moments of the Revolution, the poem *El otro*, by Fernández Retamar, one of the young writers from the 1950s and who would integrate the first generation of poets to emerge since 1959, among whom special mention should be made of Fayad Jamis, Pablo Armando Fernández, César López, Roberto Branly, Luis Marré, Rolando Escardó and José A. Baragaño, the last two prematurely deceased.

It is obvious that in the early years of the Revolution, poets highly significant to our letters in the genre such as Nicolás Guillén, Regino Pedrosa, Manuel Navarro Luna, Juan Marinello, Mirta Aguirre, Samuel Feijóo, Carilda Oliver Labra, Angel Augier, and Félix Pita Rodríguez were active and boasted an extremely high quality production. Just like, among the representatives of the *Orígenes* group, its four key names: José Lezama Lima, Eliseo Diego, Cintio Vitier and Fina García Marruz, whose work in the timeframe under study not only maintained their recognized aesthetic excellence, but also exceeded it in some cases. Many are the forms of expression of all these writers, but a colloquial tone was gradually established among the younger representatives, which significantly separated them from the most important names in the *Orígenes* magazine group and which, in the generation of young poets who emerged in parallel to that of novelists, and also gathered around a magazine, *El Caimán Barbudo* (whose publication brought together an entire generation of writers),

were clearly influenced by the work of Nicanor Parra. This led them to the “anti-poetic” expression that characterizes the work of authors like Luis Rogelio Nogueras, Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera, Raúl Rivero, Víctor Casaus, Jesús Cos Cause and, in a way, Nancy Morejon and Lina de Feria.



Alejo Carpentier

Miguel Barnet

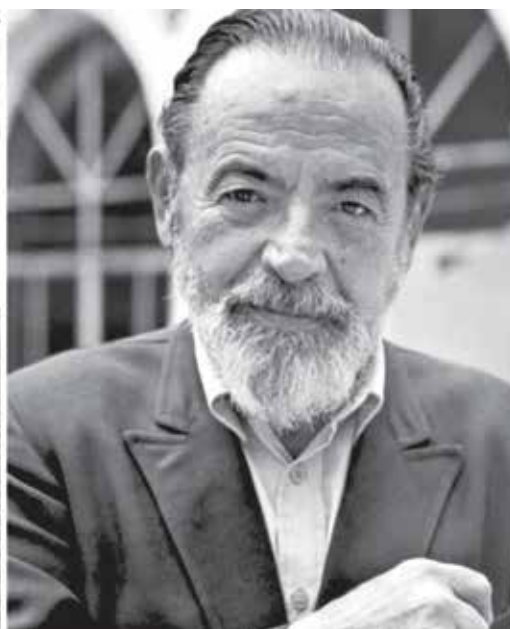
Essays and literary critique produced by different generations of writers who published in *El Caimán Barbudo*, gained extraordinary importance in the first decade after the Revolution. The priority for those authors, supported by an editorial movement that rescued the most valuable pieces of our literary heritage until 1959, was to analyze the national literary process under the most progressive thought, obviously including the Marxist-Leninist school. This work relied on the valuable precedent in our critique of Marxist affiliation of authors such as Juan Marinello, José Antonio Portuondo, Mirta Aguirre, and Angel Augier, among others, who continue to enhance their work, now massively published, and who were joined by representatives of different generations, political and aesthetic trends, as important as Camila Henríquez Ureña, Juan José Arrom, Raimundo Lazo, José Lezama Lima, Samuel Feijóo, Cintio Vitier, Fina García Marruz, Salvador Bueno, Roberto Friol, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Ambrosio Fornet, Graziella Pogolotti, Alberto Rocasolano, and Leonardo Acosta, among others. These authors continued, in later decades, their meritorious work of research and upgrading of our literary process.

As we all know, at the end of the decade, and particularly because of the successes of 1968 in Prague and the intensification of the Vietnam War, the in-

ternational ideological struggle in the cultural field increased and influenced in a special way our cultural process. Numerous intellectuals, both Latin American and from other regions, shifted to hypercritical positions in relation to the revolutionary process and in particular to its cultural policy, some in clear collusion with imperialism and others confused by the massive media campaign it unleashed against the Revolution, which in an extremely skillful way succeeded in taking advantage of undeniable mistakes of all sorts (and especially of a cultural nature) made in the country during those year.



Cintio Vitier

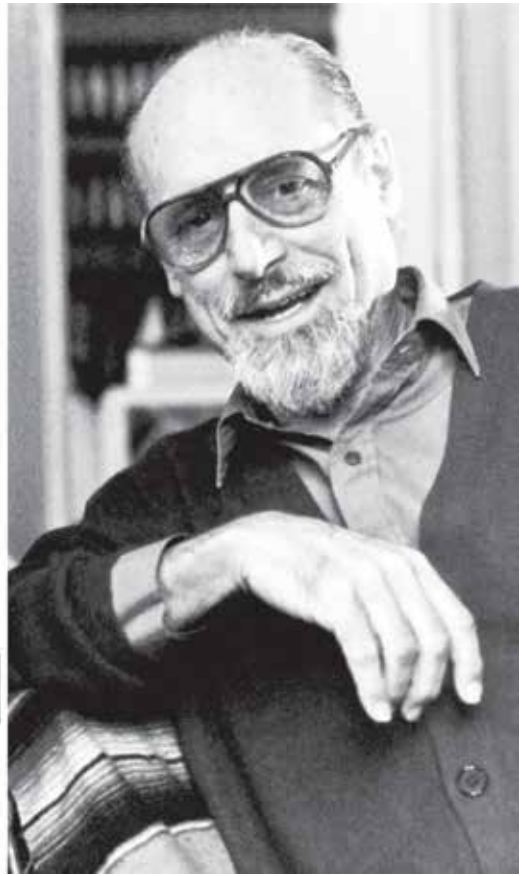


Eliseo Diego

The escalation of the ideological struggle reached its most acute expression in the postulates that guided the national cultural policy, adopted from the National Congress of Education and Culture held in 1971, and which opened in this sphere of national life the so-called “Gray quinquennium,” an expression coined by the critic Ambrosio Fornet and commonly accepted among us, with highly damaging consequences for both the national artistic and literary activity and the international prestige of the revolutionary process. Luckily, the mistakes of that cultural policy were corrected in 1975, after the conclusion of the First Party Congress, when the Thesis and the Resolution on artistic and literary culture were approved, creating a new anti-dogmatic climate, to whose development a decisive contribution was the establishment of the Ministry of Culture, derived from the spirit of the Congress and charged with implementing the cultural policy designed at the highest party level.



Nicolás Guillén



Roberto Fernández Retamar

The relevance of the work carried on by the Ministry of Culture under the direction of its two mentors, Armando Hart Davalos and Abel Prieto Jiménez is clearly commendable. Its creation coincides practically with the political and administrative division of the country, which increased the number of provinces to 14 and the number of municipalities to 169, with their respective provincial and municipal directorates, thanks to the National Directorate of Literature, responsible for implementing the ministerial policy. This institution has secured to date the effectiveness of literary work in their respective spheres.

Supported by the work of the Ministry of Culture, UNEAC, Casa de las Americas and of the system of cultural institutions which was becoming increasingly larger and specialized, the literary activity gained a meaning in national life that was totally unthinkable back in 1959. In addition to the features already mentioned, the 1970s was characterized by the emergence or consolidation of some literary genres that had been little developed among us, which then achieved a broad representation and dissemination in the various national and provincial publishing houses as well as in the main literary contests,¹ such as literature for children and young people, which in the nineteenth century had

relied on the exceptional precedent of Martí's *La edad de oro*, now resumed by authors of recognized merit like Dora Alonso, Mirta Aguirre, Eliseo Diego, and Félix Pita Rodríguez; or by names of the new generation such as Nersys Felipe and Julia Calzadilla. Detective novels, which were virtually absent in our previous literature and which given the particularities of our social development stand out in Iberian America, rely on internationally known authors like Leonardo Padura Fuentes and Daniel Chavarría, a Uruguayan writer whose literary career was practically developed in Cuba. "Science fiction", among whose writers the best is perhaps Miguel Collazo; the testimonial genre, promoted from early on by Casa de las Americas, and in which significant works by authors who continued to tread the path open by Miguel Barnet, such as Enrique Cirules, Víctor Casaus or Reinaldo González were produced; as well as gender studies, also decisively promoted through conferences and publications by Casa de las Americas and specialists like Luisa Campuzano, Susano Montero and other names of more recent generations such as Zaida Capote.

In narrative, themes such as the insurrectional fight against Batista and that directly linked to the concretion of the initial epic circumstances of the revolutionary process gave way to material and spiritual changes that this process produced in our society. These changes were already reflected in novels not only by authors of pre-1959 generations - among which is the exception work of Cintio Vitier from the 1980s and, of course, of Alejo Carpentier, whose production from the 1970s maintained and even surpassed in many respects the excellence of his pre-1959 writings, work that represents the apex of our romance at the said time - but also by new storytellers who became known basically after that time, such as Manuel Cofino, Gustavo Eguren, Ezekiel Vieta, Antón Arrufat, Jesús Díaz or Jorge Luis Hernández; besides those already mentioned: José Soler Puig, Lisandro Otero, Jaime Saruski, and Umberto Arenal, among others.

The short story, from the late 1960s to approximately the early 1990s, boasts remarkable changes. In particular, there is a decrease in the number of topics focused on capturing the epic aspects in the early years of the revolutionary process and, in contrast, the emergence of those emanating from the experiences of new generations of storytellers - many of them born in the 1950s - whose life experiences were reflected on generational themes that were so meaningful to them such as their experiences with scholarships, volunteer work, agricultural mobilizations, etc. Some of these storytellers had a precedent of high aesthetic quality in the deceased Rafael Soler, including Senel Paz, author of an iconic tale of great literary and extra-literary significance in our society - *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre Nuevo*, successfully taken to the big screen with the name of *Fresa y chocolate* [Strawberry and chocolate] by the great national filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, with script by Senel himself; Mirta Yáñez, Leonardo Padura, Francisco López Sacha, Reinaldo Montero, Guillermo Vidal, Abel Prieto, Arturo Arango, Miguel Mejides, Omar Gonzalez, Abilio Estévez, Luis

Manuel García, Aida Bahr, and Marylin Bobes. The lyric genre has also shown new thematic and stylistic traits since the late 1970s and early 1980s. Once the naive genre known as “tojosista” (poetry promoted during the “Gray quinquennium” and externally inspired by our peasant roots, without ever reaching the sociopolitical values celebrated by the “siboneyista” movement in our nineteenth century lyric) had been overcome, the young poets moved on to a “neo-origenist” expression, which somehow established a similarity between them and significant names of our poetry like José Lezama Lima, Cintio Vitier, Fina García Marruz or Eliseo Diego, and among whom one of most representative voices was that of the deceased Raúl Hernández, who left us a work that promised a continental dimension, just like the work of his opposite number in poetic expression, Luis Rogelio Nogueras, who also died prematurely at the height of his creative power.



Virgilio Piñera



Onelio Jorge Cardoso

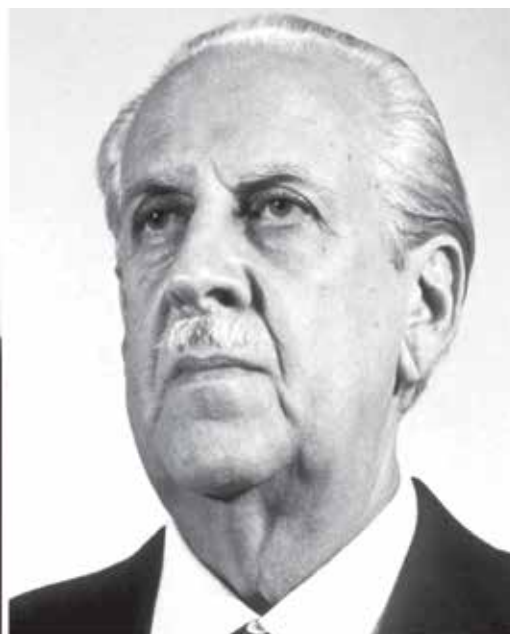
Of course the great poets of previous generations continued to produce works with high level of aesthetic maturity which, added to their wide national and international publicity, lent their authors full and deserved international recognition, as is the case of Nicolás Guillén, Felix Pita Rodríguez, Mirta Aguirre, the already mentioned great poets of *Orígenes* magazine, as well as Roberto Fernández Retamar, Fayad Jamís, and Carilda Olivier Labra, among others. In the 1970s and 1980s, already renowned authors as well as those who were emerging, also gained valuable expressive maturity, as exemplified by the production of the previously mentioned poets linked to *El Caimán Barbudo*, who

were joined, among many other names, by Reina María Rodríguez (one of the iconic lyric voices of her generation), Roberto Méndez, Marilyn Bobes, Ángel Escobar or Virgilio López Lemus.

The excellent work of the various Schools of Letters and Pedagogical Institutes of our universities, as well as of important research or learning centers like the Institute of Literature and Linguistics of Casa de las Americas, the Juan Marinello Institute, the Art Institute, the Cuban Collection Department of the National Library, etc., were reflected in the great development achieved by genres such as literary essay, critique, and research, primarily from the 1970s.



José Lezama Lima



José Antonio Portuondo

The aforementioned critics of previous generations were joined by a large number of young people (now not so young) who, equipped with a theoretical arsenal due, especially, to the development of literary theory in various socialist countries, had helped us with for decades, continued to value our entire literary heritage by examining, from a new perspective, different periods and names of the national literary history and producing texts that were essential for completing this task, as is the case of the huge *Diccionario de la literatura cubana* and *Historia de la literatura cubana*, the latter prepared under the guidance of the Institute of Literature and Linguistics and whose third volume studies for the first time ever the national literature produced since 1959 both in Cuba and outside the Island. Also worth mentioning is the extraordinary work on José Martí conducted by the Study Center that bears his name, which is engaged in the great critical edition of the literary production of our most important writer and whose publications maintain a relevant quality. Among the authors of the

new generation are researchers and critics such as Salvador Arias, Enrique Saínz, Guillermo Rodríguez Rivera, Rogelio Rodríguez Coronel, Reynaldo Gonzalez, Rogelio Martínez Furé, Miguel Barnet, Desiderio Navarro, Luis Suárez, Virgilio López Lemus, Abel Prieto, Leonardo Padura, Luis Toledo Sande, Jorge Fornet, and Alberto Garrandés; as well as a remarkable representation of women writers such as Luisa Campuzano, Nancy Morejon, Margarita Mateo, Nara Araújo, Denia García Ronda, Cira Romero, Ivette Fuentes, Mayerín Bello, and Ana Cairo.

The literary production of the last two decades is visibly influenced by the crisis occurred both nationally and internationally, by the fall of the socialist camp, which, in the internal order, caused a major crisis of values that sooner than later was reflected in literary form and whose most representative expression is found in the writings of the latest generations of storytellers. Themes rarely addressed in the post-1959 narrative such as prostitution, homosexuality, administrative corruption, double standards, the collapse of sexual taboos, nepotism, social violence, or illegal exodus from the country - in many cases presented with an unprecedented eroticism among us - have been widely explored, not always with aesthetic and ideological success, as in any literature, but rather by those authors of greater value, with a valid and resolved purpose - in essence non-contesting - of inquiring into the evils and errors of society, which they, as a generation, have the responsibility to mirror. Among its most prominent representatives are valuable authors like Alberto Garrido, Lázaro Zamora Jo, Raúl Aguiar, Jesús David Curbelo and Alberto Guerra. Among the women are two outstanding authors that emerged in the 1960s and have now resurfaced with a new impetus and success such as Maria Elena Llana and Esther Díaz Llanillo, who are joined, among others, by Ena Lucía Portela, Laidi Fernández de Juan, Gina Picart, Karla Suárez, Anna Lydia Vega Serova, and Verónica Pérez Konina.

Genres like literary essay, critique and research still survive in the latest generation of writers, as notably shown by the work of Alberto Garrandés, Jorge Fornet, Zaida Capote, Emmanuel Tornés, Enrique Ubieta and Martha Lesmes, among others.

In the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century - as expected and as actually happened in other genres, though perhaps not so remarkably - we lost capital names of our poetry who had followed the work of the new generations of poets that arose in the course of the literary process of that time and who, in those new generations, had continued their work with great quality. Among these authors are Eliseo Diego, Félix Pita Rodríguez, Samuel Feijóo, Dulce María Loynaz and, more recently, Clea Solis, Roberto Friol, Cintio Viter and Angel Augier; as well as outside the national scene, Eugenio Florit and Gastón Baquero. All these losses, preceded in previous decades by names of the stature of Nicolás Guillén, José Lezama Lima, Virgilio Piñera, Manuel Navarro Luna, Mirta Aguirre, Juan Marinello, Regino Pedroso, and Fayad Jamís could lead us to think of a real crisis in the genre. It is obvious that the absence of such

important names was deeply felt, but fortunately the production of the highest representatives of the different generations that accompanied the young poets who emerged or came to maturity in the two aforementioned decades, maintains the recognized quality of the great national lyrical tradition.

Unlike in previous decades, the contemporary lyrical production – particularly by younger authors – rather than being linked to a decisive thematic or formal trend, call it colloquialism, anti-poetry or neo-origenism, reveals a certain assimilative eclecticism of expressive postmodernity elements, which already counts on valuable contributions to our lyric by talented representatives such as Sigfredo Ariel, Reinaldo García Blanco, Frank Abel Dopico, Heriberto Hernández, Damaris Calderón, Teresa Melo, and Laura Ruiz Montes, among others.

In recent years, as the Revolution ripened and the conditions for a more thorough understanding of our cultural identity became more favorable, there has been a deepening in the studies of the literature carried forward by Cubans in emigration, which has enabled measuring with greater justice – once the dominance of the inevitable political-ideological process, of so much weight in the initial stages of the revolutionary movement was overcome – the enormous dimension of the legacy left by writers to the national culture, as well as by the intelligentsia in its broadest sense, who left the country after 1959, or by those who made their contribution before that time and have remained on the margins of the literary and political life of the Island.

The work of authors of such literary and cultural relevance like Jorge Mañach, Eugenio Florit, Gastón Baquero, Lidia Cabrera, Lino Novás Calvo, Enrique Labrador Ruiz, Carlos Montenegro, José Ángel Buesa, Ángel Gaztelu, and Hilda Perera, among those who had a solid production before the Revolutionary era, as well as those whose literature was forged or gained greater significance during the Revolution, such as Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Severo Sarduy, Edmundo Desnoes, Calvert Casey, Reinaldo Arenas, Antonio Benítez Rojo, Heberto Padilla, Jesús Díaz, and Norberto Fuentes, among others, is now the subject of study in our universities and academic centers, and in many cases re-edited by our leading publishers, except in cases like that of Cabrera Infante, in which they expressly refused to do so.

Anyway, now beginning to be known and studied among us – and sometimes published by our editors and literary magazines – is the production of those authors who achieved greater notoriety in emigration, such as Carlos Victoria, Mayra Montero, René Vázquez Díaz, Roberto G. Fernández, José Kozler, Rita Geada, Emilio Bejel, Jesús J. Barquet, Roberto González Echevarría, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Román de la Campa, Lourdes Tomás Fernández de Castro, and Eliana Rivero, as well as Oscar Hijuelos, Cristina García, Miguel Muñoz, and Achy Obejas, who have expressed themselves successfully in English.

In a broad brush way, we have tried to present the main lines followed by our literature since 1959, as well as its most prominent representatives in the different genres. Now is the time to provide a brief characterization of the distinc-

tive traits of our literature in the supranational context and, in particular, in the context of Latin American literature. Firstly, the reaffirmation of the process of continuity with the central line of the previous national literature, closely linked to the cause of social progress, now, obviously with a new meaning for the authors, who are aware of the importance of their work as creators and of the possibilities of their work for social transformation, has converted the national literature into the expression and reflection of new historical times, without that implying the non-existence of elements of rupture inherent in the dialectical relationship which in every literary process is produced between these two factors of its evolution.

In turn, being the Cuban socialist revolution the first of its kind on the American continent, the literature produced at that time stands out for its originality and independence in relation to that of other socialist countries, whose aesthetic standards that guided the cultural policy advocated certain methods and ways of creation, in essence normative, from which Cuba strayed in search of authenticity for the expression of its cultural identity.

The implementation of a cultural policy that was revolutionary in essence - although, as we have seen, not free of errors - caused a genuine outbreak of young writers that was not limited to the capital, but was the expression of a true literary life in the entire nation, which, despite the enormous material difficulties experienced, today guarantee, in their respective spheres of creation, an editorial potential that channels their productions, in a continuous process of quantitative and qualitative development. Among them is an increasing number of writers whose work has provided one of the most fertile and interesting elements - markedly recognized by critics specialized in gender studies - of women's presence in the literature of the time.

This production is also characterized by an opening of our literature to international spheres, which is unprecedented and expressed in multiple ways. Experience was accumulated - although there is still much to be learned in this regard - and the mechanism of promotion of our literature worldwide, when perfected, allowed its dissemination in terms never before heard of. This dissemination, along with numerous international awards received by our authors and their participation, despite the economic difficulties faced by the country, in various events of this nature, motivate the increasing focus of foreign critics on Cuban literature.

Particularly significant in recent decades has been the process of internalization and subsequent postulation of the indivisible character of Cuban culture and therefore of its literature, which has led to a greater understanding of the wholeness of our literature and of the contributions of authors, who, for various reasons have left Cuba or even have sustained (and sustain) opinions against the revolutionary process. As we have mentioned, in its editorial aspect this fact has translated into multiple reprints of texts representing many of the most distinguished writers who decided to settle out of the country after the declara-

tion of the socialist character of the Revolution, as well as, although to a lesser extent, into the publication by our editors and in literary magazines, of works by important authors who after the Revolution became known outside of Cuba and with their creation have contributed to considerably rising the level of the so-called literature of the Diaspora.

Finally, this nationally gestated literature, a literature in essence within its extremely abundant variety and securely rooted in the best of our tradition, is characterized by its ethics, its loyalty to the purest values of socialist humanism, without making concessions to pornography, elitism, populism or other disfiguring manifestations that degrade its value.

These are some of the distinctive traits that characterize the literature produced in the new era of our literary history started by the Revolution. It would be impossible, given the limited space we have to write these pages, to dwell on the wealth and magnitude of our literary in its half a century of existence. Let these pages, therefore, be a simple introductory guide to the knowledge of this literature and an incentive to the reading of works and the study of authors who, together, have forged one of the most unique and valuable literatures amongst all in our language.

Note

1 The time described is characterized by the establishment of a broad system of contests that had a decisive influence in our literary life.

Abstract – This paper aims to offer readers an overview of the literary process in the new age of national literary history that began in 1959 with the triumph of the Cuban revolution. To this end, and within each major literary genre and mode, we present a chronology of the most prominent works and authors (both those already active and those who emerged over the last decades) and the political, social and economic context in which they produced and published their works. We also mention some key aspects of Cuba's cultural policy, e.g., Fidel Castro's *Words to intellectuals*, the so-called "Gray quinquennium" and the current view on the literature of the "Diaspora." Finally, we attempt to formulate a concise characterization of some of the essential traits of the literary works produced at the time.

Keywords: Continuity and disruption, Cultural policy, "Gray quinquennium", Diaspora, Generations, Cultural identity, Epic character.

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