OPINION: Cintio Vitier and the History of Cuban Ethicity

By: Enrique Ubieta Gómez / Special for CubaSí
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It was the year 1994, and the marvelous city in which we live and love was struggling to survive after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Ideological debate once again permeated artistic creation and spilled over into every sphere. That year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of *Orígenes*, one of the most important literary magazines in Cuban history, created by a group of seemingly disaffected intellectuals. Some believed it would be easy to hijack the commemoration, since several of its members had endured ostracism during the so-called "gray years." For reasons that remain unclear, Cintio Vitier's *Ese sol del mundo moral*, a fiercely revolutionary book, had yet to be published in Cuba (it would be the following year, 1995, twenty years after its original release in Mexico). But Cintio Vitier was an insurmountable obstacle to such attempts. Like Enrique José Varona in the 1930s—despite their significant differences—Vitier had become over time a moral compass of the Revolution.

An international event was organized to commemorate the anniversary of the magazine, and a group of young people prepared a panel to "attack" Cintio. I was walking through Vedado's H Park with a colleague from the Institute of Literature and Linguistics, on our way to Casa de las Américas to register for the event, when we ran into one of those new critics (whose name I will not mention). With stunning arrogance, he told my friend—he didn't know me—that they were going to "destroy" Cintio, not for his aesthetic ideas or supposed misjudgments, but for his political stance. A vain and ridiculous delusion.

If dogmatic Marxists—who, by that very nature, were not truly Marxist—had labeled him an idealist (in the philosophical sense), opponents of the Revolution used similar logic: they called him an ontologist (because he sought to grasp the "essence" of the national being) and a teleologist (since he believed that all historical events move toward a destined end). In truth, what they resented was the Martían and Fidelist thesis of a single Revolution, the one that began in 1868 and bore fruit in 1959, regardless of its recurring causes: colonialism and neocolonialism. It was not that history had come to a self-satisfied halt. *"I also don't believe one can say that the failure of history is over,"* he told me in 1998, *"and that the triumph of 'the good guys' is now permanent. I think that failures, that downfalls, help pave the way forward."* But those who accused Cintio, Martí, and Fidel sought to strip history of its meaning to rid themselves of ethical responsibility. The thread of Ariadne tells us where we come from, not where we're headed: the future has no final destination. Along the way, hundreds of possibilities await realization.

For now, I'll say this: *Ese sol del mundo moral: Para una historia de la eticidad cubana* (now republished in the Biblioteca del Pueblo Collection), along with Roberto Fernández Retamar's Calibán and Ernesto Che Guevara's Socialism and Man in Cuba, are among the most representative essays of the Cuban Revolution. Paradoxically, the first two were written during the "*gray five-year period."* They did not emerge out of nowhere. Cintio's essay is a synthesis—written from the vantage point of the Revolution—of his earlier work Lo cubano en la poesía (1958). But what kind of Marxist would call a historical poem

idealist, when it illuminates the very moments in which concrete human actions and attitudes open the path toward ethical being? Cintio Vitier narrates history, but in truth, he fights for the future. His concept of identity is dynamic, far from ontological: *“What matters to the revolutionary,”* he writes, *“is not the history that has been, but the history that is becoming (where ‘the highest examples’ remain active): not the stagnant and fixed human being, but the human in becoming.”* In 1995, this book, which defends what he calls “the history of Cuban ethicity,” was essential—just as it is now.

The highest vantage point from which one can simultaneously view the past and envision the future (the desired one, which Cubans must tirelessly strive for) is José Martí. *“The decisive factor in his thinking,”* Vitier asserts, *“does not come from the philosophers: it comes from the heroes and martyrs.”* In another passage he writes: *“Martí’s secret lies in the balance between reason and heart, both strained across the axis of native soil, history, and spirit.”* Like Martí, Cintio is a *“hunter of souls.”* Was Martí an idealist? An absurd question. Martí not only spoke of the past and recounted what his predecessors said and did—he also built the future and foretold what his successors would say and do.

Vitier presents in his book scenes that anticipate the end (let’s say the “present”), with Martí as a mediating figure, an omnipresent voice in history. The ethical verticality of Martí’s thought pierces through the horizontal layers of history and becomes part of the collective memory of the nation. This deep-rooted ethic, Vitier believes, is *“the essential point of connection or graft between Martí’s thought and Marxism.”*

It’s no coincidence that the first glimpses of Cuban nationality are found in poetic descriptions of the island’s landscape. Nor is it surprising that our first great poet, José María Heredia, experiences, as Vitier observes, *“the agony of injustice, the disharmony of humiliation (…) in fields ‘cloaked in sublime beauty.’”* Vitier perceives a crucial difference between fiction and poetry; the latter is real, the former is not. He knows how to distinguish between what is real and what merely exists. Thus, the Republic established in 1902 was a historical lie, a fiction. Presidents like Zayas and Machado, corrupt and submissive, *“even in private spoke in the language of ‘proceres’ [founding fathers], like the*

*fictional characters they were."* After the failed 1930 Revolution, fiction took over the revolutionary ideal as well. Yet the transcendent impossibility lies at the heart of Cuban history. It was so in 1878:

Before Céspedes, at the dawn of La Demajagua, countless possibilities unfolded. *"Those possibilities,"* Vitier writes, *"were exhausted, gloriously and sordidly, throughout the ten years of struggle. When none seemed left, the 'impossible' rose before Cuba, provoking the most profound and creative possibility: Antonio Maceo's 'No' at Mangos de Baraguá—negation of the negation."*

Many years later, the same would happen again: to those who *"spoke only of 'atmosphere' and not of the 'subsoil,' as Martí told Nicolás Heredia before the events of 1895,"* and who invoked the inappropriate "correlation of forces" and the absence of *"objective possibilities,"* a small group of brave individuals "created a new reality, a new objectivity, a new correlation of forces." Just as after ten years of independence struggle *"nature itself took on a moral meaning and a new geography emerged: the geography of marches and battles, of victories and defeats,"* the Moncada assailants, gathered the night before on a small farm outside the city, felt—according to Haydee Santamaría's later account—that nature seemed closer and more human in the face of death. *"Just as in Heredia we observed the discovery of justice through beauty,"* writes Vitier, *"that night brought the intuition of the world's beauty through justice."*

In the prologue to one of my books, Cintio Vitier wrote:

*"Referring to that collective ideal, perhaps coinciding with what we've called 'identity as a spiral,' Ubieta concludes: 'It is not anthropologists who proclaim it, but politicians.' To which we might add, with his sure agreement: and poets. And above all, among us, that poet of political action (and of words eager to become flesh) who is always knocking at our door [...] To live up to such a paradigm is no easy feat. To be a Martían people is no easy feat. The Revolution we are making is not easy, and cannot nor wishes to be. To the dark difficulties imposed by the enemy, we oppose an even greater difficulty, a high and luminous challenge: to be worthy of the life and death of José Martí."*

Yes, the Revolution is poetry: a leap toward the heavens, a condor's flight. That is what Cintio Vitier taught me. Cuba was "created" through successive acts of poetry, not as fiction, but as reality. In this book, Cintio offers an extraordinary testimony of that creative process.

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