

## Introduction

This is a book about the singular verbal and aesthetic experience present in the work of the Cuban poet, novelist and thinker José Lezama Lima (1910-1976). In the pages that follow, I will argue that this experience constitutes a reflection on the ways in which rhetoric and the imagination shape our conceptions about language, culture and history.

Lezama wrote some of the most difficult and labyrinthine poems, novels and essays in modern Latin American literature. Arguably the two most conspicuous aspects of his work are his supremely strange writing and his ambitious theory of culture and poetics. Lezama belongs to that distinctive category of writers like Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Paul Valéry or Stéphane Mallarmé who, besides their works of poetry or fiction, also produced a significant body of theoretical texts. The case of Lezama is all the more significant in view of the scope of these writings, which encompass subjects as diverse as poetics, aesthetics, cultural history, gender, politics and religion. According to his own account, Lezama wanted no less than to conceive what he called a “sistema poético del mundo.” As he puts it in “La dignidad de la poesía” (1956): “el intento nuestro es un sistema poético, partiendo desde las mismas posibilidades de la poesía” (*LLOC* 788).

But how are we to understand the relationship between these two aspects—difficulty and the *sistema poético*? Critics have placed a strong emphasis on the aspect of Lezama’s cultural theory, often at the expense of engaging more fully with Lezama’s writing. *Lo difícil*, in itself, has not received the attention it deserves, and subjects like Lezama’s ideas about history and culture are often approached independently of his peculiar use of language, or without taking this into account altogether. Is Lezama’s difficulty just an idiosyncratic “style”? Is Lezama’s theory expressed in the *concepts* of the *sistema poético*? These two questions may seem rhetorical or banal but I would argue that they are not. The coexistence, on the one hand, of what appears or presents itself as a conceptual

*system*, and on the other hand, of the delirious register of Lezama's writing, raises the question of what is the nature of his theoretical intervention.

My contention is that the singular linguistic experience afforded by Lezama's texts is in itself an essential component of his theories of poetics, culture and history. Under this view, difficulty is not simply a peculiar style, and a *lezami-ana* theory is not simply the *sistema poético*. Inquiring into the profound link between language and thought in Lezama Lima has a special significance for two reasons. Firstly, this link involves to an important extent aspects of discourse that do *not* pertain to the conveying of meaning. One way to characterize Lezama's writing is that it mobilizes a host of verbal mechanisms—for example, extreme rhetorical density, convoluted syntax, erudite extravagances—that may displace or overshadow the transmission of substantive content. Syntactic play or rhetorical density are aspects of discourse that do not “mean” anything in themselves or convey a substantive content. However, they do produce certain *effects*, and such effects partake of what I have referred to as a *verbal and aesthetic experience*. Secondly, note that this inquiry amounts to viewing Lezama's texts from a perspective that is attentive not only to the meaning they convey, but also to their formal aspects. In particular, this opens the possibility of seeing Lezama's thought under a different light, insofar as one seeks to approach his works in ways that go beyond usual assumptions about interpretation and hermeneutics. As I will show, the exploration of that verbal and aesthetic experience will disclose hitherto unexamined—and perhaps some unintended—aspects of Lezama's conceptualization of culture and history.

I would like to begin by presenting some contextual background that will help situate not only Lezama's own ideas but also the direction of my own inquiry. I am referring to the circumstances in which José Lezama Lima became a canonical *Latin American*—i.e., not just Cuban—writer, and what this meant at that time. Lezama's entry into the Latin American canon is inseparable from a certain intellectual tradition that played a hegemonic role until the 1970s, and which Alberto Moreiras has characterized as an “aesthetic-historicist project that looked to preserve and reinforce the specificity of Latin American ... social power against an invasive and threatening outside” (*The Exhaustion* 14). The Cuban Revolution and the Latin American Boom are two of the most prominent—and arguably the last—examples of this tradition. Lezama's canonization at a continental scale coincided with these two pivotal events, but it is significant that his work is not a manifestation or offspring of them. Before the triumph of the Revolution in 1959 Lezama had already produced a substantial

part of his mature work and was one of Cuba's most renowned writers, but he was little known outside the island. Lezama's canonization beyond Cuba's borders did not take place until the momentous year of 1966, when the UNEAC (the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists) published his novel *Paradiso*, the anthology *Órbita de Lezama Lima* (which included a collection of testimonies by literary celebrities such as Wallace Stevens, Luis Cernuda, Alfonso Reyes and Octavio Paz), and Julio Cortázar's essay "Para llegar a José Lezama Lima" in *Unión* (UNEAC's journal). From then on, Lezama began to be read outside of Cuba. In 1967 Cortázar's essay appeared in his *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, published in Mexico; in 1968 *Paradiso* was published in Buenos Aires and Mexico; in 1969 an anthology of Lezama's writings prepared by José Agustín Goytisolo was published in Spain; and in the following decade *Paradiso* was translated into French (1971), Italian (1971), English (1974) and German (1979). What is worth noticing is that Lezama's entry into the Latin American canon took place in the context of the Boom. Although Lezama certainly is not a Boom writer, he became a *Latin American* writer according to the idea of "Latin American literature" produced by the Boom.

The co-optation of Lezama's essayistic work in this particular historical setting also marks the emergence of Lezama Lima as a "theorist." The *azar concurrente*—to use an expression dear to Lezama—of his "internationalization" on the one hand, with the Latin American Boom and the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on the other, produced an image of Lezama as a representative of that Latin Americanist humanism (cf. Moreiras, *The Exhaustion* 13-4) whose primary concern was to approach the study of Latin American cultural productions in terms of their specificity and exceptionality (other Cuban thinkers like Fernando Ortiz and Alejo Carpentier are major examples of this tradition). Lezama's theory of the New World Baroque in particular, is regarded as a primary exhibit of this paradigm: the Cuban poet as a theorist of decolonization and *americanista* thought whose contribution is summarized in his often-quoted dictum "entre nosotros el barroco fue un arte de la contraconquista" (*EA* 80). For Lezama, the Baroque is a style that was born in Europe but achieved its fullest realization in the New World by means of a transcultural appropriation and transmutation of European, African and indigenous cultural artifacts and practices. From here two closely interrelated images of Lezama emerge. The first is that of Lezama as a humanist and theorist of Latin American exceptionality proper. Perhaps the most revealing example of this approach is Irlemar Chiampi's exemplary critical edition and introduction ("La historia tejida por la

imagen”) to *La expresión americana* (originally a series of lectures Lezama gave in January 1957), in which the Brazilian critic explicitly traces a genealogy that links Lezama’s thought with the work of Octavio Paz, Pedro Henríquez Ureña and Mariano Picón Salas. The second consists in viewing Lezama as an encyclopedic “cannibal” who appropriates and subverts the cultural archive from the periphery. This interpretation was already present in Cortázar’s essay and has its most theoretically elaborated iteration in the widespread characterization of Lezama’s work as Neobaroque.<sup>1</sup>

The variety and scope of approximations to Lezama’s work has expanded considerably since the 1990s. Besides, or along with, the Neobaroque, other important critical perspectives include: comparatist (Salgado), queer (Cruz-Malavé, González), hermeneutic (Heller), non-humanist critique (Levinson), or intellectual history (Rojas, Ponte, Duanel Díaz) (the works of Levinson, Salgado and Santí have been especially influential in my own study of Lezama). There are certainly “many Lezamas” and this is a corollary of the incomparable richness of his texts. But it does not follow from this, of course, that Lezama can be “anything.” If one surveys the scholarship about Lezama since its humanist and *americanista* beginnings until today, and speculates about possible directions in the future, it is possible to identify certain dilemmas and risks. The list is not exhaustive, but it includes: first, what Brett Levinson has called the dogma of “autotheorization” (“Globalizing Paradigms” 82), or the belief that Latin America or its components can only be properly theorized from “within.” Second, and closely related to the previous point, is the consideration of Lezama Lima as a “peripheral” or “national” intellectual: is this something inevitable or even *necessary*, in order to avoid “colonizing” him, or is it a reductionism that must be surpassed? And last but not least, there is the risk of “postmodernizing” Lezama. The challenge is to pursue an investigation that engages with Lezama’s *eccentricity*—geographical, cultural, theoretical and textual—in a way that goes beyond reductive “center vs. periphery”-type dichotomies or, as Lezama puts it,

<sup>1</sup> In chapter four I will return to the image of Lezama as representative of Latin American exceptionality. Some of the most recent scholarly works produced in the United States that either mention or are about Lezama place special emphasis on the Neobaroque. See for example the “Theories and Methodologies” section of *PMLA* 124.1 (2009) titled “The Neobaroque and the Americas” (especially Zamora, “Neobaroque, Brut *Barroco*,” and Greene therein). See also Spitta and Zamora; Kaup and Zamora; and Egginton 69-84. However, it should be pointed out that these recent works do not necessarily engage in viewing Lezama from the standpoint of humanism or *americanista* exceptionality.

“la subordinación de antecedente y derivado” (*EA* 62), and avoids the risks of the postmodern clichés.

One first sign of Lezama’s eccentricity involves the sources of his thought. Lezama produced his work from the late 1930s until the 1970s. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that, contrary to many of his contemporaries, the European influences on his thought come not from the likes of Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Heidegger or the avant-garde, but rather from the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Nicholas of Cusa, Vico and Pascal. Lezama’s work is autonomous and distant—culturally and conceptually—from some of the philosophical currents from which mainstream contemporary theoretical thought sprang. This realization should serve as point of departure for any attempt to think about the theoretical import of Lezama’s work.

A further aspect of Lezama’s eccentricity concerns the way he (*mis*)reads those anachronistic sources.<sup>2</sup> It is often the case (although not necessarily always) that Lezama does not engage in a “charitable interpretation” of the text he reads and appropriates.<sup>3</sup> Whether Lezama’s failure to perform this type of interpretation is deliberate or not, conscious or not, has little relevance for my analysis here. But most importantly, it should not be associated with any negative connotation. On the contrary, Lezama’s misreading of the tradition is a fundamental element of his theoretical intervention. This comprises two complementary aspects. The first consists of how Lezama’s interpretation of other thinkers or ideas effectively amounts to the creation of wholly different and new concepts. In the case of Lezama this process is resolutely paradoxical. On occasions he establishes a relationship of attribution or correspondence between, on the one hand, a certain thinker or idea, and on the other hand, what is effectively a totally novel concept of his *own* creation and which bears no similarity with the meaning and intention of the original thinker or idea. The new idea Lezama creates—via misinterpretation or misattribution—may be quite suggestive in its own right from a theoretical standpoint, and sometimes allows viewing the original under novel and surprising perspectives. The second aspect corresponds to the formal devices that Lezama deploys as he misreads and rewrites the tradition. As I will show in various examples, Lezama’s idiosyncratic misreadings involve the mediation of a

<sup>2</sup> On Lezama’s misreadings see for example Santí, “Lezama, Vitier,” and “Párridiso.”

<sup>3</sup> I borrow the term “charitable interpretation” from Anglo-American philosophy of language. Here I use the term to refer to an act of interpretation that seeks to optimize rationality and grasp the true meaning of what is being interpreted and the intention behind it.

host of rhetorical and semantic displacements that metamorphose the original into a distorted simulacrum or an altogether new concept. Ordinarily, when one reads a text and finds an interpretation or reference to a certain thinker, idea or cultural artifact, the common assumption is that the author of such a text charitably (cf. note 3) expresses something truthful, or believed to be truthful, about the referent (unless one assumes beforehand that the author in question is deliberately lying, but this is besides the point here). However, in Lezama's case, there are occasions in which such ordinary and commonsensical assumptions do not necessarily apply. When one finds a reference to, say, Kant in a text by Lezama (I will study such an example in detail in chapter one) it becomes necessary to question the nature and content of the relationship between the German philosopher and what Lezama calls "Kant" or "Kantian," for these may actually correspond to something altogether different. There are cases in which what appears to be a reference to some character, idea, thinker, cultural artifact, etc., actually corresponds to a displacement from a proper use or sense to another that is wholly strange. In such cases one cannot even say that Lezama is "misunderstanding" or saying something "wrong" about the referent; rather, he is *inventing* something altogether new. In these cases what I believe is productive from a critical point of view is not so much to find whether what Lezama is saying is true or false, or whether he is understanding a certain thinker or idea or not, but rather to examine in detail how he is producing novel and surprising concepts, images and ideas out of the cultural archive. This mode of creation, this instance of *poiēsis*, I would argue, is a fundamental aspect of Lezama Lima's theoretical intervention.

The line of inquiry I have outlined so far entails the necessity to identify the specific bibliographical sources Lezama used. This critical method casts light on two aspects. The first concerns the nature of Lezama's erudition and the encyclopedic scope of his work. In a strict sense, the materials that Lezama borrows from the cultural archive and which constitute the primary components of his imaginative constructions, come originally from the specific works, editions, translations, anthologies, etc., that were available to him in Havana. This library, however vast—and Lezama's tremendous erudition proves the extent to which he assimilated it—is nonetheless constrained. In order to make sense of Lezama's delirious knowledge, certain questions are especially relevant: Where does this or that reference come from? Where could Lezama have read it? What edition or translation—if any—of a certain work or author could have been available to him? Determining the identity of the sources is a necessary condition to analyze

what Lezama's (mis)readings are about, as well as the interpretive and rhetorical devices he uses to appropriate and metamorphose elements of the cultural archive into something new. This brings me to the second point. As I will show in various examples, there are some instances in which what is ostensibly a reference to a certain writer, idea, literary or philosophical work can be viewed rather as an appropriation of "pieces" from other texts. In these cases what is important to observe is not so much the substantive "content" of the referent and how it is interpreted, but rather how Lezama appropriates a certain phrase or passage from one of his books, and then creatively manipulates it by means of misquotation, mistranslation, plagiarism, false attribution, paraphrase or rhetorical displacements. In certain cases, what ostensibly appears as Lezama's "interpretation" of a certain writer or concept, should be viewed instead as Lezama's *formal* manipulation of a *textual fragment* which originally comes from a specific book that was available to Lezama. What is being transformed here is not so much "content" but "form."<sup>4</sup>

This mode of transformation allows one to see the *sistema poético* under a different perspective. As I said earlier Lezama Lima produced an autonomous body of texts about poetics, culture and history that were endowed with a certain theoretical intentionality. One of the most visible indicators of the "systematic" and "theoretical" qualities of these texts lies in the fact that Lezama expressly created a series of (pseudo-) concepts that correspond to his ideas about the poetic craft and how one can imagine and represent the world. These concepts serve to formulate and articulate a theory and a poetics and, at least in principle, they can serve as analytical and interpretive tools. Put in other words, these concepts provide a certain way to think and speak *about* literature, culture and history (in fact, Lezama uses his concepts in this way, and many of his critics do so as well). However, the postulation of a *sistema poético* and its hermeneutical potential must be placed and understood in a broader context: the *singular linguistic experience* afforded by Lezama's texts—their difficulty, hermetism, and resistance to interpretation. In this regard, there seem to be two conflicting impulses operating within Lezama's work as a whole: on the one hand, many

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<sup>4</sup> The lack of correspondence between "form" and "content" I have outlined above may suggest some parallels with Paul de Man's deconstructive readings and their disclosure of aporias constitutive of literary and philosophical texts. However, there is a substantial difference. My interest here is not to reveal contradictions between the intended truth or message of the text and its form, but to explore the formal operations at work within Lezama's text and how these operations transform materials from the cultural archive into something else.

of his texts submit a linguistic experience that forgoes every intuitive and conventional notion about communicating and conveying a message; but on the other hand (paradoxically? contradictorily?) his work is also about his project of devising a *sistema poético del mundo*—a universalist body of concepts that, however fuzzy or strange they may be, is intended to provide a way to interpret culture and history. How do these two orders of discourse relate to each other? How can they be reconciled (if such a thing is possible)?

Sooner or later, whether consciously or not, every reader of Lezama eventually confronts these questions. One possible way to answer them is to take the aforementioned opposition as a point of departure, and then try to solve it by assuming that in the end one can subsume Lezama's linguistic experience, no matter how opaque or difficult, to some hermeneutical system or procedure. There exists some type of interpretive code that, at least in principle, can be "applied" to Lezama's texts—including his most opaque verse—and "explain" them in the end. Note that this amounts to disclosing what the substantive "content" of these texts is, what they are *about*. The *sistema poético del mundo*, or more precisely, the tacit affirmation of a "transcendental hermeneutics" that would be the condition of possibility of such a *sistema*, amounts to affirming that in the end one can always elucidate the seemingly intractable opacity of Lezama's language. In other words, this hermeneutical hypothesis asserts that Lezama's idiolect can be fully "translated." According to this, even Lezama's most outlandish verbal inventions are, in the end, *about* some substantive content lying beneath a layer of opaque expressions that ought to be disclosed.

In this book I approach these questions differently. My attempt here is to take that singular linguistic experience itself—Lezama's impenetrable verse and convoluted prose, his flamboyant erudition and the uses he makes of it, his outlandish imagery, his errors, anachronisms, plagiarisms and misreadings—as the basic element of a *lezamiana* theory. This amounts to a whole reformulation of what appears to be a dichotomy between the two contrary impulses of a conceptual system that plays a hermeneutical role versus a body of "resistant" texts. This dichotomy, I would argue, is only apparent insofar as Lezama's highly idiosyncratic linguistic experience is *always already* at work.

The essays in which Lezama expounds his *sistema poético* are a case in point. The aim to conceive of a conceptual model, endowed with a hermeneutical or explanatory capacity, is also patently obscured by an *intensive* deployment of a *tropo*-logical register. The "prosaic" (cf. Latin *prorsus*, "straight") intentionality of these essays is subject to constant twists, deviations, or tropings (cf. Greek



*tropos*, “turn”). Lezama’s encyclopedic extravagances and his eccentric mode of appropriating elements of the cultural archive complicate this effect further: an already heterogeneous assortment of cultural and linguistic entities becomes “organized” according to patterns that may have no evident motivation or reason. These arrangements are often resistant to interpretation or paraphrase and end up articulating a *tropological* order of discourse.

This transformation operating at the level of form, and in which content ends up being displaced or receding to the background, is a crucial aspect of Lezama’s cultural and textual *poiēsis* and is one of the topics I study in this book. Note that I am neither claiming that in Lezama’s essays there is no such a thing as “content” nor that it is unimportant. In fact, in various sections of this book I attempt to interpret the meaning of some terms from Lezama’s idiosyncratic idiolect, and this is a necessary condition for analyzing the formal process I have referred to above. What I do argue is that in Lezama’s texts there also exists *another* mode of reflection in which *form* itself, and not just concepts, produces a “theory.” “Theory” in Lezama is not merely in the content—ideas, concepts, their substantive meaning—of the *sistema poético*, but also in *how it is written*. Any type of hermeneutic analysis of Lezama’s texts, however necessary, remains insufficient insofar as it overlooks this essential feature.

So far I have been focusing mostly on the essays about the *sistema poético*. I have used the *sistema poético* as a starting point both because it is a body of texts that clearly displays a theoretical intentionality, and because it is where the tension between “content” and “form,” interpretation and its limits, the formulation of a system and the eccentric writing thereof, is most visible. But the *sistema poético* is one particular instance (and not the most radical) of Lezama’s linguistic experience. There are two other notable instantiations of the singular verbal phenomena Lezama’s writing brings about: his poetry, and his meta-historical speculations, which culminate in the theory of the *eras imaginarias*.

José Lezama Lima wrote some of the most impenetrable verse in the Spanish language. Some of his long poems (for example “Dador,” “Nuncupatoria de entrecruzados” or “Recuerdo de lo semejante”) are a notable example of this. What is significant is not only the exceptional degree of difficulty of these poems, but also what type of difficulty they present. These texts constitute a modality of discourse that I would like to denominate (il)legible *logos*. The paradoxical nature of the (il)legible *logos* can be viewed upon contrasting avant-garde poetry with Lezama’s. The avant-gardes provide illustrative cases of poetry that can be considered “illegible”: the last cantos of Huidobro’s *Altazor*,

certain poems of César Vallejo's *Trilce*, or Marinetti's *parole in libertà* are a few examples among many. Illegibility in avant-garde poetry is often an effect of verbal, visual, and auditory experimentation. But experimentation is absent from Lezama's poems: these are texts composed of grammatical sentences and meaningful discourse; they are firmly anchored within the organicity of *logos*, understood in an ordinary sense. Illegibility here is of a substantially different kind—it is a paradoxical illegibility *within* the realm of what is (potentially) legible, not outside of it, as in the case of avant-garde experimentation. Another feature of what I call (il)legible *logos* is that what it expresses is not exactly a “metaphorical” meaning in the ordinary sense. The tropes that one finds in some of Lezama's most daring poems are not necessarily “decodable” in the manner of, say, “cuadrado pino” stands for “table,” to borrow an example from another famously “hermetic” work of Spanish poetry (cf. Góngora's *Soledad primera*, v. 144). In Lezama there is a deliberate tropological density that reaches a point in which it becomes practically impossible to conceive something like a “transport” from the literal to another “figural” or “metaphorical” meaning. The theoretical import of Lezama's poetry lies in the paradoxical nature of (il) legible *logos*: this is an order of discourse that simultaneously *creates* and *thwarts* the demands and expectations of interpretation. Therefore, I would like to suggest that Lezama's “hermetic” poems are verbal artifacts that present a theory of *non-hermeneutic* reading and of how to perform it. The exploration of the non-hermeneutic features of the literary text and the question of how to approach them are topics that have received substantial attention recently. In his *Production of Presence* (2003), Hans Gumbrecht uses the term “non-hermeneutic” (vii) as a starting point for his proposal to inquire into that which the text “does” that is not reducible or definable in terms of “meaning.” Mlutu Blasing's provocative *Lyric Poetry* (2007) does away with hermeneutics by exploring the primal bodily and infantile aspects of poetics. In his contribution to the 2010 special issue of *PMLA* on “literary criticism for the twenty-first century,” Simon Jarvis argues that “poetics need not subserve hermeneutics” (932) and advocates a study of verse that does not “rely on the logic of a mimetic relationship to paraphrasable content” (933). In the specific case of Lezama's poetry, what is notable is that its immediate hermetism and the way it subverts that “logic,” sooner or later prompts the question on how to read beyond or outside the usual interpretive protocols of deducing and paraphrasing the substantive “content” of the text.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In this regard my own approach contrasts with Ben Heller's application of Gadamerian hermeneutics to the study of Lezama's poetry (*Assimilation* 21-6). When explaining his

The linguistic experience that Lezama's texts make manifest also plays a fundamental role in his speculations about history and culture. The totality of Lezama's intellectual career was guided by the belief, inherited from Romanticism, that the poet occupies a privileged position not only with respect to language, but also with respect to *history*. Lezama's reflections on history and culture encompass three domains. The first is the New World Baroque, to which I have referred earlier. This is the core of Lezama's *americanista* ethos and the main motive behind the influential portrayal of him as a decolonizing thinker. The second concerns the political and cultural project of Cuba as a modern and sovereign Republic.<sup>6</sup> Before the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, Lezama shared with many other intellectuals a pessimistic outlook on the national project that began with the independence of Cuba in 1902. In a time when the young Cuban Republic was plagued by the ills of corruption, political violence, instability, and US interventionism, Lezama looked at the history and cultural production of his nation and judged that there was no such a thing as tradition in Cuba. The supposed lack of a tradition in Cuba—i.e., of an organic mode of interpreting and organizing existing cultural artifacts so that they become the expression of a national and historical community—was one of Lezama's main preoccupations throughout his intellectual career. The *Orígenes* project in particular was a bold attempt by a group of writers and artists led by Lezama to imagine ways to fill the void for the lack of tradition in Cuba.<sup>7</sup>

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methodology. Heller rightly underscores Gadamer's theses on the provisional nature of the interpretive act and the "fictional element" (*Assimilation* 22) it contains. To be sure, such an acknowledgement is essential as a starting point for any study of Lezama's work. Heller's intention is to distill a certain meaning or content—however provisional and open—from Lezama's poems. Unlike Heller, I seek to explore the immanent phenomenon of *resistance* to interpretation that the verbal experience of Lezama's texts submits. Here lies the theoretical import of such an experience—it constitutes a reflection on the *non*-hermeneutic aspect of poetry and aesthetics. This by no means implies that Lezama's poems have "no meaning" or invalidates the possibility and pertinence of a hermeneutical approach. The case is rather that many of Lezama's poetic texts (and even some of his works in prose) display with unparalleled vividness a tension between, on the one hand, the ordinary demands of interpretation and the possible meanings the reader may derive (this would be the focus of any hermeneutic approach), and on the other hand, a mobilization of verbal and aesthetic effects whereby those possibilities are kept at a distance. Studying this phenomenon is one of my purposes here.

<sup>6</sup> This topic has been discussed at various points and from different perspectives by authors like Cintio Vitier, Rafael Rojas, and Duanel Díaz among others.

<sup>7</sup> For excellent studies on the political and cultural project of Lezama and *Orígenes*, see Rojas, especially "*Orígenes* and the Poetics of History," and Díaz.

Finally, in the third and last domain we move from the realms of the national and the hemispheric towards the universal—the *eras imaginarias*. This is the topic I analyze at length in the third part of this book. In “Mitos y cansancio clásico,” the first lecture of *La expresión americana*, and in some of his essays from the late 1950s and 1960s, Lezama forges a fantastic synthesis of history, poetry and myth. He sought to conceive an imaginative mode of understanding universal history according the mythopoetical faculties of peoples and civilizations—both ancient and modern—and their ways of representing the world. Under this view history is not compartmentalized following usual criteria like chronology and national identity but according to the power that each historical community has to create myths and poetic images, and to their transhistorical recurrence. Each *era imaginaria* is constituted by a collection of different kinds of entities—civilizations, religious beliefs, legends, historical characters, events, etc.—that have in common their being a manifestation of a certain poetic image that recurs across historical time.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective history is arranged into different “eras,” each one associated with the same poetic image, yet composed of a heterogeneous assortment of entities that belong to different epochs. In the theory of the *eras imaginarias* history is not organized according to temporal progression, i.e., as a diachronic sequence of facts, but according to the poetic image, and this corresponds to *anachronistic* groupings of disparate historical events and cultural artifacts.

My specific interest in the theory of the *eras imaginarias* is based on my contention that they can be read not only as the mythopoetical description of culture and history I have outlined—they can *also* be viewed as an instance of the eccentric verbal experience of Lezama’s writing. If one follows Lezama’s own exposition of the concept of *eras imaginarias* in works like *La expresión americana* (1957), “A partir de la poesía” (1960) and “Paralelos: La pintura y la poesía en Cuba (siglos XVIII y XIX)” (1966), one can see that they amount, borrowing Rafael Rojas’s expression, to a “poetics of history.” This should be understood in both an etymological (cf. Greek *poiōo*, to make, to produce) and a radical sense. In “La pintura y la poesía en Cuba” Lezama writes: “La historia está hecha, pero hay que *hacerla de nuevo*” (LLOC 948, my emphasis), and this

<sup>8</sup> In “A partir de la poesía” (1960) Lezama lists the different *eras imaginarias* (LLOC 835-7): the “era filogeneratriz,” “lo tanático de la cultura egipcia,” “lo órfico y lo etrusco,” “espejo de la identidad en Parménides,” “los reyes como metáfora,” “las fundaciones chinas,” “el culto de la sangre,” “las piedras incaicas,” “los conceptos católicos,” and the era of “la posibilidad infinita,” which comprises José Martí and the Cuban Revolution.

remaking—or equivalently, “reading anew”—of history “únicamente podrá ser esgrimido por un verdadero poeta” (*LLOC* 950). The “historian” of the *eras imaginarias* is a poet that recreates and rewrites history, and discloses “un nuevo sentido configurativo histórico artístico” (*LLOC* 950). This activity can be seen in two ways. The poet-historian explores the modes of poetic thought that have appeared in different epochs and identifies how certain poetic images are “repeated” across history. But there is another—and in my view no less interesting—way of seeing the work of the poet-historian: it comes from the realization that what is ostensibly a process of identifying images, patterns and repetitions, is in reality a process of *inventing* those images and their interrelationships. This is the correlate, now in the realm of culture and history, of the verbal worlds that Lezama creates in his poetry. The *eras imaginarias* can be seen as highly artificial constructions that violently remove cultural artifacts, ancient civilizations, or historical events and characters from their original or “proper” context, for then rearranging and grouping them according to figural links created by the poet. Under this view, the *eras imaginarias* are removed both from history, understood in its ordinary sense (an order of discourse based on facticity and chronology), and from the postulation of pre-existent mytho-poetical archetypes that recur across time. The *eras imaginarias* can also be viewed as a rhetorical construction—a *troping* of historical discourse.

The poet-historian of the *eras imaginarias* extracts cultural artifacts and historical events from the order of discourse of history proper, and then creatively rearranges them according to an aesthetic and figural “reason.” Lezama’s eccentric use and manipulation of elements that are ordinarily subject to the order of discourse one commonly regards as “history” correspond to an operation that reflects on the very constitution of *historiography*—i.e., the *writing* of history. Note, however, that this is very different from regarding the *eras imaginarias* as an “alternative” history. The *eras imaginarias* may be regarded as an alternative *writing* of history but this is something different from history proper. One risk must be avoided: there may surface the temptation to view Lezama as some type of relativist, “postmodern” historian *avant la lettre* who claims that there is no such a thing as “historical facts” but only rhetorical constructions. This is misplaced for at least two reasons. To begin, while Lezama certainly talks about concepts like “fiction,” “poetry,” and “history,” he does *not* posit the opposition fact vs. fiction, nor he is interested in inquiring what is the “true” referent of historical discourse or formulating a critique thereof. Second, rhetoric need not imply relativism. Michel de Certeau, following Roland Barthes, aptly

characterized historical discourse as “performative” (de Certeau 113). In principle, in every historical text there is an implicit address to the reader: “what you are reading actually happened.” Historical discourse necessarily ought to mobilize a host of rhetorical devices in order to fulfill this speech act “feliculously,” to use J. L. Austin’s expression (22). But whereas one acknowledges that rhetoric plays an ineludible role in producing a historical account of a certain event, the hard relativist claim that “facts” are constructed and rhetoric is in the end what determines “facticity” does not follow from this.<sup>9</sup> The *eras imaginarias* are not so much a “peripheral” appropriation of historiography, and are not only about the search for a trans-historical and universal “poetic reason” constitutive of human civilizations—they are also a critical reflection on how history is written.



In the short essay “Nuevo Mallarmé, II” Lezama wrote: “Si Valéry ha dicho de Mallarmé que para leerlo hay que aprender a leer de nuevo, es innegable que él comenzó por ahí, por aprender a leer de nuevo toda la asombrosa diversidad del saber y del acto poéticos” (*LLOC* 526).<sup>10</sup> For us, more than half a century later, Lezama’s own work and figure is a reverberation of those lines. What is striking about this passage is not so much what it says about Mallarmé, but that it corresponds to an accurate portrait of Lezama himself. For this is precisely what Lezama did—he *read anew* poetry, culture and history. This idea will guide my argument in the pages that follow. I have divided this book into three parts: Metaphor, Island and Allegory. This sequence represents the transit of the inquiry into Lezama’s thought I develop in this study—from words to culture

<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, even though it can be misguided to overemphasize the supposed affinities between Lezama and some trends of postmodern thinking about history, it can be productive to inquire further into how Lezama’s thinking can illuminate some of the contemporary debates on fact, fiction and rhetoric in historical writing. For a good—albeit somewhat biased—source on the debates about historiography, postmodernism, and relativism versus realism in history, see Jenkins.

<sup>10</sup> This quotation comes from the second of two pieces on Mallarmé that Lezama wrote for his column in *Diario de la Marina*. The text appeared originally on March 4, 1956, and was later included in *Tratados en La Habana* (1958). The reference to Valéry comes from “Yo le decía, a veces, a Stéphane Mallarmé...”—the Spanish translation of Valéry’s 1931 essay “Je disais quelquefois à Stéphane Mallarmé...”—included in the anthology of Valéry’s prose writings *Política del espíritu* (1940), translated by Angel Battistessa: “Aquel que no rechazaba los textos complejos de Mallarmé se encontraba, pues, insensiblemente comprometido a aprender a leer de nuevo” (*Política* 130) [Celui-là donc qui ne repoussait pas les textes complexes de Mallarmé se trouvait insensiblement engagé à réapprendre à lire (*Œuvres* 1: 646)].

and history. Metaphor is the most basic principle of both the *sistema poético* and the non-hermeneutic dimension of Lezama's work. The Island is the figure that mediates between the realm of poetry and the realms of nation, tradition, history and culture. Allegory describes how Lezama thinks and represents history and culture.

Chapter one examines the foundations of Lezama's rhetorical investigations in detail: his ideas about metaphor, and the production of concepts in the *sistema poético*. "La metáfora" and "el sujeto metafórico" are recurring expressions in Lezama's writings, and one can argue that metaphor is the fundamental block of his distinctive "way of worldmaking," to borrow philosopher Nelson Goodman's concept (*Ways* 7-17). But what is metaphor for Lezama? And more precisely, what aspects of metaphor are relevant for understanding Lezama's thought and writings? I discuss the critique of Aristotle's theory of metaphor Lezama advances in the 1954 essay "Introducción a un sistema poético." For Lezama, contrary to Aristotle, metaphor is not a representation of preexisting and ultimately extra-linguistic relationships among objects in the world. Metaphor is about *inventing* relationships; we devise or imagine correspondences and then apply them to the world in order to create our picture of it. Then I turn to the 1958 essay "Preludio a las eras imaginarias" in order to inquire into the genealogy of some of the concepts of the *sistema poético*. The creation of concepts here corresponds to highly unusual forms of production of sense. In multiple modes—lexical, conceptual, semantic, contextual—Lezama violently displaces an expression, a quotation, a literary text, a philosophical concept, or a cultural artifact from its original or proper "place" and then creates an altogether new and unexpected network of significations.

In chapter two I continue the exploration of tropes and verbal displacements with a detailed reading of one section of Lezama's long poem "Dador." I begin by pointing out some correspondences between certain images and expressions used in this poem and concepts Lezama introduced in the essays on the *sistema poético*. These connections are revealing insofar as they help us realize the limits of thinking about Lezama's work in terms of the *sistema poético*. This brings me to the question of the *non*-hermeneutic dimension of Lezama's text. The text of "Dador" sets in motion an operation of production of sense I call the *hypertrope*: a collective activity of extensive and intensive twisting and turning (cf. Greek *trópos*) of "sense units"—i.e., words, phrases, their meanings, the themes and images they allude or refer to—in which any referential or conceptual stability is systematically undermined. The overall effect of this operation is the

impossibility of fixing or ascertaining something like an organic and coherent “theme” or “meaning.” In the last section of the chapter I discuss this breaking down of the literal/ figural and vehicle/ tenor distinctions in light of Donald Davidson’s controversial theory of metaphor and some of the debates around it. As I show, these debates prove very useful for attempting to grasp and describe the non-hermeneutic aspect of the verbal experience of Lezama’s poetry.

Chapter three probes into another iteration of Lezama Lima’s verbal experience: the link between language, poetry, tradition and the passing of time. I analyze Lezama’s elaborate reflection on these connections in the hybrid text “X y XX” (1945). Lezama’s theoretical intervention in this text revolves around three ideas: the *topos* of the island, death and resurrection, and memory. In “X y XX” these ideas are condensed in the peculiar appropriation—via creative quotation, paraphrase and interpretation—of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem “Prose (pour des Esseintes).” I begin by discussing the hypothesis of *sensibilidad insular* Lezama advanced in the *Coloquio con Juan Ramón Jiménez* (1937), to then show how “X y XX” is the site in which two different insular imaginaries meet: the *sensibilidad insular* and the island that appears in Mallarmé’s metapoetical text. The overall effect of this confluence is to transcend the nature-culture dyad inscribed in the idea of *sensibilidad insular* and transform the insular *topos* into what I call the *poetic event*: this is a unique and non-repeatable speech act, of which only “remnants” survive in the form of symbolic marks subject to the ever-changing contingencies of historical time. This, in turn, corresponds to the idea of “death and resurrection.” Whereas in Mallarmé’s “Prose” resurrection is a metapoetic figure that expresses the materialization or “event” of the poem, in “X y XX” resurrection conveys how this event is situated and subject to historical change. Lastly, memory is the other idea that both texts share. “X y XX” appropriates the verses on “Prose” that deal with memory in order to intimate that the interpretation of culture—the process whereby individuals and communities creatively “resurrect” what comes from the past—can also be viewed as a mnemonic activity insofar as the remnants of past cultural artifacts can be viewed as “memories” that ought to be “recalled” and then appropriated creatively.<sup>11</sup> I explore how Lezama develops further this conception of memory and recollection in his 1950 essay “Exámenes,” a text that has many thematic and formal similarities with “X y XX.”

<sup>11</sup> This is an idea that Lezama had already introduced in his essay “Julián del Casal” (1941) through his concept of “crítica de la razón reminiscente.” See Santí, “Lezama, Vitier.”



The ideas of resurrection and memory expounded in “X y XX” anticipate some of the ideas behind the conception of the *eras imaginarias*. In chapter four I put forward the principles that guide my analysis of the *eras imaginarias* as another instance of Lezama’s verbal experience. The starting point is a reading of “Mitos y cansancio clásico,” the opening lecture of *La expresión americana*. It is here where Lezama introduces the *eras imaginarias* by way of what he calls *visión histórica*: the revelation of surprising relationships among disparate cultural entities belonging to different epochs and civilizations. Better known as a decolonizing theory of the “expression of the Americas” and the New World Baroque, *La expresión americana*, as I show in this chapter, is also a critical reflection on the writing of history. The remainder of the chapter examines the transit from *visión histórica* to the *eras imaginarias*. The *eras imaginarias* can be viewed as a “theological” modality of *visión histórica*. This can be intuited from how Lezama employs references to philosophers like Nicholas of Cusa, Vico, and Pascal when he lays out the principles of the concept of *eras imaginarias*. But all this poses some fundamental questions. How can one understand the postulation, founded upon theological doctrines, of transhistorical archetypes that are manifested in the *era imaginarias*? And more to the point, how can one understand the existence of such an archetype along with the conspicuous *artificiality* of the *eras imaginarias*?

In chapter five I propose an answer: *allegory*. I argue that allegory presents a way to think about what I call the double life of the *eras imaginarias*—they appear to live simultaneously in a transcendental and in an artificial realm, inside and outside of history. I explore the references in Lezama’s texts to various German Romantic, idealist and post-Romantic thinkers (Novalis, Hegel, Dilthey, Klages) and see how the Cuban poet read this tradition. I establish some key correspondences—and no less fundamental differences—between the early German Romantic view of allegory and the way the *eras imaginarias* signify and operate. I also discuss how Walter Benjamin’s study of allegory in the German mourning drama or *Trauerspiel* affords a key insight into the understanding of the *eras imaginarias*: the signifying components or “moments” of the *eras imaginarias* can be viewed as *ruins*. The *eras imaginarias* can be regarded as a collection of ruins and, consequently, as a staging of the inexorable passing of historical time. But ruins here, I argue, not only refer to the representations of ancient objects or extinct civilizations that compose the *eras imaginarias*—they also refer to Lezama’s own (*mis*)readings and (*mis*)writings of the past, as evinced in his eccentric appropriation, manipulation and reorganization of

cultural artifacts and historical events. This is the operation of José Lezama Lima's verbal experience upon culture and history—this experience is both a *ruined* discourse and a *ruining* discourse, insofar as it subverts or “ruins” the past and prophetically discloses how the present will also be misread and ruined.