Juan Pablo Lupi

Although somewhat paradoxical given the subject matter, the greatest strength and most valuable contribution of Juan Pablo Lupi’s Reading Anew may be the clarity and accessibility of his argument. Also impressive is its applicability to parts of Lezama’s oeuvre not specifically discussed by Lupi. Arguing that Lezama’s theoretical understandings of history and culture are grounded in the rhetorical difficulty, or “tropological density,” of his prose, Lupi shows that the writer’s sistema poético del mundo is not simply a key to decoding his poetry (p. 24). Rather, he argues, it is a mode of thought that appropriates metaphor and functions allegorically to move the reading experience away from meaning and toward a future potentiality that challenges traditional historiography and philosophy. Lezama’s difficult language thus creates what Lupi calls an “(il)legible logos,” a discursive modality that goes beyond avant-garde destabilizations of meaning (p. 23). Instead, it reveals the temporal distances, discontinuities, and deferrals of meaning that separate the text from the reader, who is expected, but unable, to perform a textual exegesis that would link representation to a specific signification, constructing new links between language and meaning instead. Lupi argues that a similar process is evident in Lezama’s notion of history as a set of eras imaginarias that connect periods and places through images rather than chronology. Reading is a transitory process of creation, constantly renewing itself and replacing philosophical commonplaces, such as the form/content divide, with “otras causalidades” (p. 54).

Lupi makes the case for reading Lezama this way in five chapters that together address both canonical and lesser-known works, including “Introducción a un sistema poético,” Coloquio con Juan Ramón Jiménez, “Dador,” La expresión americana, and “xy xx.” Central to his argument are the already well-known function of metaphor in Lezama’s work and, perhaps more radically, the role of allegory in creating a unique reading practice and experience. As he suggests, rethinking Lezama in terms of allegory does not contradict the importance of metaphor, but rather reinforces a broader gesture at work in his essays, poetry, and theories: “the task of the poet, who can also act as critic and historian ... to invent—to find and create, and to materialize invention in discourse” (pp. 64–65, emphasis in the original, here and throughout quotations in this review). This invention begins with Lezama producing a “weak sublation” of Aristotle’s notion of metaphor. Lupi shows that Lezama maintains metaphor’s structure (“this is that”), but does so by destabilizing the binary between literal and figural, establishing a new causality that is pre-logical, but not illogical,
and which “[liquidates] the empirical and ontological substratum” of language (pp. 47–48). In this way, “Lezama is demonstrating how to do things with words, not with the empirical properties of objects” (p. 51).

By Chapter 5, it is clear that this refiguring of language and/as thought has a political aspect when considered as an alternative organization of knowledge to traditional historiography. The eras imaginarias Lezama uses in La expresión americana to reorganize historical events are allegorical artifices, in the Benjaminian sense of constituting the nonbeing of what they represent. Thus, “one cognizes ... the transits of la imagen across different cultures and epochs ... only through the mediation of this array: the signified cannot be presented directly; it is only “said”—so to speak—a allegorically, through the collection of diverse historical and cultural entities that constitutes the era imaginaria. And at the very end, there is nothing but this collection” (p. 223). Because the eras imaginarias emphasize form by decontextualizing culture and history, they reveal the transitoriness of signification and the distance between fact and representation. They are therefore a ruination that is also a resurrection, since they imply a gap between present and future—an infinite possibility—as well as a gap between past and present. The result is a lack of the absolute in the construction of signification, as well as a lack of limit or teleology in history. When viewed in the context of the politics of Cuban historiography, this erasure of absolute referentiality suggests that, contrary to its ideological discourse, the Cuban Revolution is only ephemerally messianic (p. 242).

These ideas are grounded in the detailed textual analyses included throughout the book. For instance, Lupi’s discussion of “Dador” in Chapter 2 shows how Lezama invites readers to decipher his text while also privileging “lo indescifrable” through the use of hypertropes that produce “an estrangement from ordinary participation in language” (pp. 72, 79). “x y xx” affords Lupi the opportunity to show in Chapter 3 how Lezama’s concept of sensibilidad insular from Coloquio con Juan Ramón Jiménez changes over time and intersects with Mallarmé’s metapoetical trope of the island.

Several supporting points resonate as well. Particularly convincing is Lupi’s view of Lezama’s poems as aggregates. While “fragment” implies a unity prior to representation, “aggregate” suggests a “radical heterogeneity” that confounds the assumption of hermeneutic possibility (p. 85). Additionally, Lupi’s emphasis in Chapter 4 on the role of Bergson in Lezama’s thought is refreshing. Lastly, while it is easy to move into rather heady territory when discussing Lezama, Lupi also addresses the materiality of the writer’s work. One example is when he shows that Lezama’s invocation of Kant comes from a mere two pages of a Spanish translation of the Critique of Practical Reason, an appropriation that echoes the surrealist privileging of the objet trouvé.