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## **“La fijeza”: The Hope of the Temporary Progression through the Image of the Caribbean Location<sup>1</sup>**

### **Resumen**

Lezama Lima fue un poeta, ensayista y novelista cubano considerado, junto a Alejo Carpentier, una de las más grandes figuras de la Literatura caribeña. Su detallado conocimiento del barroco, especialmente de la poesía de Góngora es también su necesidad de fijar una identidad cubana que le permita proponer una estética innovadora que va más allá del desencanto propio del barroco. Los versos de “La fijeza” son algunos ejemplos de esta visión. En este orden de ideas, el propósito de este trabajo es presentar un análisis de algunos de los poemas de “La fijeza” con el objeto de explicar la forma que Lezama se distancia de la concepción del desencanto del barroco y cómo, al mismo tiempo, presenta versos de esperanza, identidad, universalismo por medio de la representación de la imagen poética de los paisajes del Caribe y sus relaciones espacio-temporales –cronotopo bajtiniano- en una forma de explicar una visión de la poesía como forma privilegiada para volver a crear el mundo.

### **Palabras claves**

*Poesía lezamiana, cronotopo, fijeza, esperanza, identidad cubana.*

### **Abstract**

Lezama Lima was a Cuban poet, essayist, and novelist considered as well as Alejo Carpentier, one of the greatest figures of the Caribbean island literature. His detailed knowledge of the baroque literature specially Góngora’s poetry, and also his necessity of fixing a Cuban identity, allowed him to propose a very innovative esthetic which goes beyond the disenchantment proper of the baroque. The verses of “La fijeza” are some examples of this vision. In this order of ideas, the purpose of this work is to present the analysis of some poems of “La fijeza” in order to explain the manner in which Lezama distances himself from the baroque disenchantment conception of the world and how, at the same time, he presents verses of hope, identity and universalism by means of presenting the poetic image of the

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<sup>1</sup> This is a text derived from my presentation “La fijeza: tiempo y espacio insulares”, in the 38<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Caribbean Studies Association, on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at Grenada Grand Beach Resort, Grand Anse, Grenada.

Caribbean scenery and its spatio-temporal relationships —the Bakhtinian chronotope— in a way to explain a vision of the poetry as privileged way to re-create the world.

#### Keywords

*Lezamian poetry, chronotope, fixity, hope, Cuban identity.*

When we talk about Lezama<sup>2</sup>'s poetry we are talking about how difficult it results to assign it in a paradigm, because in this case it is an unexpected baroque as Vitier (2002) says. In this sense we are going to examine carefully some aspects in which the Cuban writer distances himself from that disenchanted world's baroque idea: we are referring to the time conception and the relationships which the lezamian work establishes within time and space, as well as his poetry's conception as gnoseological mean of the Caribbean spatio-temporal connections and, by extension, Latin-American ones.

In this spirit, the purpose of this article is to explain the spatio-temporal relationships in some poems of the series “La fijeza” (1949). It is well known the metapoetic technique of Lezama —metapoetic means poetry seen through poetry—; it is also well known its universality alternated with its aesthetic necessity of a Cuban identity, Latin-American identity if one prefers; well then, this forms of identity expressed through poetry, specifically through time and space relationships, are in “La fijeza”, one of the best ways of reaffirming the Cuban being, of course, always dialoguing with the universal forms of knowledge, philosophy, and history. To develop these lines, we are going to discuss the Caribbean landscape and the connection of such a landscape with time.

For a start we are going to explain the Bakhtinian concept of chronotope since it is the one which best links the spatio-temporal relationships we want to discuss. Bakhtin says that “in the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thoughtout, concrete whole. Time as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space

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<sup>2</sup> 1910-1976.

becomes changed and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (1990 84 ).

The literary chronotope we are going to name the poetic chronotope in order stick more to the corpus and in order to be more specific, is related to the spatial and temporary connection in a way that responds to particular needs. It could be that a writer attached or compressed the time, or moved it through a pendulum, or moved time in circular motions, while a space occupied by a man could be compressed and expanded, so that man, as well as in contemporary narrations, was teleported. These connections are of the paramount importance to present a hermeneutic of the evaluation that a writer presents of the History, of the writing, of his own context, and of the universal context.

The word “fijeza” (fixity), central focus of the selected poems, is referred, in the true meaning of the expression, to persistence and continuity. The section of poems begins with two sonnets (which poetic structure is fixed), a chorus, and an eclogue, in the classical Greek way; it is transmuted into that land’s idyllic essence, even though in this case it is not the vision of an idyllic nature, but an idyllic supernatural world, because the first nature has been lost with the original sin; the Cuban nature therefore remains as an eclogue, nostalgia, and remoteness.

In these verses there is a fixation in the look; hence the title of the first poem (the eyes of the burgundy river), the river of blood which looks the war of the Syracuse sheperds. The title focuses in a river, water in movement, which suggests a persistent, but not static look of the nature, which in this case is not the genetic and Christian God’s Arcadian nature; it is a nature that has been stained with the blood on account of original sin; hence the need of another look, although an adulterated one: “si fusilan/ la sombra los envuelve” (Lezama, *Poesía* 106). The shadow and blood make the look to lose the translucency and transperance vision, which are in normal conditions, characteristic of water; nevertheless and despite the color variation, the movement feeling persists and that involves a river which flows spatially and temporally. Here the river is a



symbolism of the spatio-temporal connections, so the chronotope is one of permanent movement and not statism. The shadow makes the size of the bodies to change, makes the image bigger, that is, in the end, which remains of the real figure; that suggests the idea of a manufacture based on a nature that is not presented as it is. The shadow, together with the blood, both nictomorf symbols, refer to a look perspective from darkness, a blind look, which involves, as the apostle Paul required, not the look, but the faith. The title is, in this context, an allegory of the poetry as persistent look, but not a static one; additionally, the shadow and the blood, could allude to a not clear, neither transparent image.

In the first twelve verses of the third section which is entitled “Los ojos del río tinto” there is a marine vision which at the beginning seems to be of disenchantment. The semes “hiel”, “angustia”, “mar destruido”, “irreconciliable”<sup>3</sup> refer to a feeling of unease that produces the awareness for the sake of the course of the time: “Una ráfaga de hiel cae sobre el mar,/ más corpulenta que mi angustia de hilaza inmortal” (Ibid.), the poet knows the yarn, will be cut and the poetic “I” reincarnates the anguish of mortality in a kind of consciousness of chronic, concrete, accurate and quantitative time; this starting part of the poem could put Lezama into the disillusionment proper to the baroque. In the poem “Alegoría de la brevedad de las cosas humanas”, Góngora says: “Aprended flores, en mí/ Lo que va de ayer a hoy,/ Que ayer maravilla fui/y sombra mía aún no soy” (1993 127).

Based on the foregoing, there is a decadent vision of space: the sea is poisoned by the bile, the “lluvia sombría sobre el mar destruido”; this bile that falls over the sea is compared to “pájaros que fuesen gotas sobre el mar”; it would think about a despair of significance symbolized by the fall of the birds the wings of which, apparently, have been melted, as in the case of Icare. So, in these verses the spatio-temporal connection is used to demonstrate a disappointment, a vision near the baroque vision of time and space.

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<sup>3</sup> Bile, anguish, destroyed sea, and irreconciliable.

Likewise and as the verses ten to twelve suggest, there is a fight of the speaker's organs: "Mis dedos, mis cabellos, mi frente,/ luchan con mi costado, mi espalda/ y mi pecho" (Lezama, *Poesía* 106); therefore, it is the beginning of a fight between the most visible body organs<sup>4</sup> which represent rationality and experience —the hairs, for example, involve a temporary progression— and the less visible organs<sup>5</sup>, the most forgotten ones, and which are charged with the anguish, the dismal, the moral pain and anxiety.

The other half of the verses, definitely separates Lezama's conception from the disenchantment vision of the world; those verses point out a hope from the imagination; it is about a creative perception as well as the poet says: "En esos días irreconciliables, / fríamente el ojo discute con la mirada", that discussion between the physical and the creative looks, open up, from the empiric "I" to the poetic "I" who begins to participate in the poem by means of the use of the first-person singular; the moon, the epiphany of time is a celestial body which wax and decreases; the moon is a celestial capricious body that is subjected to the transitoriness and death; thanks to the moon and its cycles the time is measured (Durand 2004 106). The moon does not accomplish to hurry up the bones which represent an intimate part of the poetic "I" anatomy.

In the verses of the second half of the stanza, the poet rejects the Chronic time which was fixed by the Greek culture, this time is quantitative, therefore typical of the history and of the rationalistic discourse (Camarero 1995); the poet rejects the Chronic time in order to travel in time and space: "Estoy en la torre que quería estar:/ un tegumento que puede unir mis cabellos,/ una sonrisa que traiciona la línea del mar" (Lezama, *Poesía* 106). Whether we talk about the sea or the tears, the poem is referring to a despair matter; the sea is a watery forest, a downfall forest, a mysterious forest, to sum up, that oceanic forest produces terror. Nonetheless the poet betrays the oceanic line, he feels he can penetrate it, fly beyond its boundaries, and arrive at the tower of his dreams, where he looks at

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<sup>4</sup> Fingers, hairs, front.

<sup>5</sup> Side, back, and chest.

the horizon, where he can find the hereafter, where he can transcend. The gods have been kidnapped by the sea, although they are innumerable; the sea owns monsters which protect it from unwanted visitors; the poem ends: “Mi indolencia peinaba la frente del mar/ y originaba la muerte/ en aquellos seres fieles, veloces e inocentes” (Ibid). The poet has stubbornly focused on a primordial vision —by means of the use of the past tense— in order to calm those rough waters and fixed them for fixing the time. In addition, the death of gods is the death of constraints imposed by those gods, which represent the destiny of the human existence; so with these verses the poet denies life seem as chronological history which forces us to vanish; the poem also denies the mythical vision which forces us to be attached to the faith, to fix an origin; that is why Lezamas’s idea is very far from producing the original time, neither god’s deeds in *illo tempore* and neither a simulation of man’s and world’s creation: his purpose is to represent a new origin, a new creation, very different from history and its myths. This poem proposes and antropophany in which man is the owner of his time by means of his imagination, so the poetry of Lezama proposes a chronotope in which time and space are reborning. Abel Prieto says in the introduction of the *Confluencias* of Lezama that this way of re-creating the origins of Cuban people and moving forward the future based on new origins, is a way to transcend what is colonial and at the same time involves an evaluation of the *potens*, that means, guessing through the imprecise larval forms, forms that could be; so Lezama is proposing the reader —in one of his eruptions— the liquidation of mechanicals approaches for studying the bonds between tradition, present and future in the cultural development; the poet, then, brings the reader face to face with the process itself (Lezama, *Confluencias* XI).

Now the sea is deserted on account of the gods’ absence; they have fled without a single groaning, so the sea is now reborning. That watery vision looks over all the poet’s emotions; his tears, his sweat, the bile gusts, and the aspects of the landscape: the rain, the ocean, all of them present a need for a change even in the time and space which move waiting for death. That bile gust which falls upon the sea is after fragmented into “gotas que fuesen pájaros/ y pájaros que fuesen

gotas sobre el mar”<sup>6</sup>. Birds, symbols of significance, ascending symbols, also show hope amidst anguish and sorrow; it is about a verse, the poetical word itself the means by which significance is accomplished. In an incomplete lezamian image, rain as water fragments, emphasize poetry is fragmentary, and those watery fragments want to fly, want to transcend. Note that the background of all these feelings is the sea. Lezama, island poet, presents a watery syntomatology, he creates by means of the Caribbean scenery, but he brings forth a new world, the *topos* as genetic image, so he brings forth a hope, amidst those waters which become deep darkness, and the boundaries of which are broken by the smile of the poetic hope. When Lezama submits the time linearity, the history never begins; on the contrary and paradoxically, the history is always starting.

In the poem IV of the same section it is presented a musical vision that is also primordial and the vision of landscape seems to be, as the poems presents it, very Latin-American. The poem begins: “Desvían sus escamas inalterados ojos” these verses depict the fixity of the eyes amidst “la lluvia entretenida”<sup>7</sup> and suggest the drumming of rain over the trees as in a fugue: “Las aguas disparadas a los árboles,/ inteligente flauta gota a gota, suenan y parecen toscas manos/ en la rencorosa copa de los árboles”; the leaves, “chalecos verdes” (green vests), become tenors with the touch of water. That watery fragmentary image, dreams Persian pins; in this poem the rain dreams about another place, another time; the amusing rain that sings scaly whistles; this dream of rain moving is given by means of the ocean, the scale (metonymy of aquatic shift), is reiterated in the first verses of the poem. It is about a vision of the Cuban island, the tree standing next to the sea, the tree seen from the sea and the sea seen from the tree; the water over the leaves, touch of flute, drop by drop. Rain drops, each one of them with its knocking, from different heights, falling upon different leafy bodies, in different parts of the tree, play as in fugue, as in a pack of wolves choir.

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<sup>6</sup> Drops which were birds/ and birds which were drops upon the sea (the translation is mine).

<sup>7</sup> Amusing rain.

In this case it is about the night rain; night, silence and the essential sense of which is hearing, is an ideal space for music, but in this specific case night is viewed as *kairós*: convenient time, critical time, occasion, opportunity, appropriate circumstance (time qualitative notion). It is an appropriate time for creating, by means of the deconstruction of the rationalist vision of night according to which it is a inert time for creativity: the blindness, opens other senses, creates a synesthetic image, creates from night Caribbean scenery, but what it does create? Well, this blindness creates a flute fugue, as another starting point. That is why this lezamian image links the image diurnal order of the image, the tree, knowledge symbol (Eliade) with what is nictiform; the result is the darkness as light—in a paradoxical way—, because thanks to night we can see, we can know, we can apprehend the world, we can create art as well. In respect of the relationship of what is known by means of the poetry and the Latin-American topic, the poet says in his essay “A partir de la poesía” (Starting from poetry) (1960) that the magnetism of the unknown is from the Latin-American side more immediate and more desirable. The unknown is almost our single tradition. When a certain situation or words are converted in some unknown for us, this situation stick us and produces an outburst. Is for this same reason that the final verses proclaim the idea of certain liberty regarding to the European thought: “Nítida y sin minervas escamosas/ la flauta que suspira golondrinas”. The landscape flute of the island night avoids Minerva, Roman goddess which leads all the intellectual activity; on the contrary, the island night prefers swallows, migratory animals which represent the need of travelling to other places, to other worlds. Poetry, —specifically Cuban poetry— is migratory and is nurtured by different cultures which are supernatural and where there are not partitions built by the eighteenth century bourgeois rationalism. In both, the Lezama’s essay writing and poetry, there is a literary obsession in order to the culture help us to demolish the walls that segment the humankind thought, as well as their way of conceiving the universe and the way of connecting with it. In the analysed verses, the chronotope is presented as a change of space in order to present a universal vision, a new



beginning, a new time that flies all over around the world and takes into account all the forms of knowledge. The place for this new beginning and universalism is the Cuban island and, of course, its primordial companion: the Caribbean sea.

The eighth poem is the poem that shows in the best way the attached hope regarding to the temporary flow. Some verses say: “Los cabellos amorosos que aíslan el rostro/ del enemigo, de lo que nos ha sido robado a caballo, tan rápido que nuestro dedo índice no puede señalarlo”. In these verses there is an awareness of the passage of time effects, throughout the equine figure, chthonic symbol<sup>8</sup> par excellence; nonetheless in the face to this disenchantment the poetic voice also resists: “Los cabellos afinándose aún más, detienen su redondez,/ prefieren saltar el límite gris, los ojos del recuerdo, prefieren agitarse con un viento suave primero, después ese viento [...] deja las huellas de un reencuentro/ en el que se ha combatido, un despertar en otra arena” (Lezama, *Poesía* 110). The hairs, as it is written in some paragraphs up, symbolize the passage of time, the gray color, of course, is a clear image of damage in the humankind; but still the poet prefers to go beyond the boundaries and be shaken by a soft wind; the wind, air in movement, is also a symbol, although, aerial, of temporary flow, but in this particular case it is about a setback, a creative wind, a wind of the primordial time through which memories fly.

The image of the hunter in whose arms the birds die, the oil in the hairs as counterpoint between hope and anguish: “pero allí resbalan los aceites, los perfumes,/ la vida adulterada por una delicia prestada; el aceite que es para la eternidad”. The oil was a prosperity symbol in the biblical Hebrew culture as the God blessings evident in overflowing with oil vats of winery (Joel 2. 24). Likewise, as well as the oil in the head is used with the purpose of calming and relaxing, the oil could be a symbol of peace and tranquility that runs amidst the anguish. That is why the hair “no se aísla en ceniza” queda “detenida en instrumento que tañe de nuevo,/ un instrumento como una escala prolongada,

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<sup>8</sup> The chthonic horse is the tack of Hades and Poseidon (Durand 79), gods of underworld.

donde mi pesadumbre descende o se corona”. This image, which rejects to be ashes and becomes an instrument playing again, like a prolonged scale, places before reader’s eyes the possibility of ascension against linear time and against death as a way of heroism through the fixity, through the image of the hair stopped by the time. Here, the aged, but energized human body shows a metaphoric chronotope which symbolizes a concretewhole in which time and space move back in order to recreate a new hope, here the poet goes beyond the reality in order to be reborn and the place for such a reborning is, clearly, Cuba. This heroism is given by means of the poetic word.

Regarding to the re-creation of the world Bejel (1994) says:

Para él las llamadas leyes del mundo y la naturaleza no tienen una relación estable ni son necesariamente las mismas que las leyes del intelecto en el sentido racional. La metáfora lezamiana implica inestabilidad, dinamismo y cambio progresivo. No se trata de la reproducción de un mundo, sino de la creación de un mundo. Por eso es que lo oscuro en un poema, lejos de ser un obstáculo, es una incitación necesaria, pues la poesía es precisamente esa invitación hacia lo que todavía no tiene sentido, lo desconocido.<sup>9</sup> (34)

The purpose of this essay was to present briefly an approach to the poetic text of Lezama, beginning with the conception of such a text as a result of the individual consciousness of the cultural producer on the Caribbean telluric environment in an effort for restoring the lost time. The corpus of this analysis was taken from the series entitled “La fijeza”, in which poems the poetic “I”

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<sup>9</sup> For Lezama, the called laws of world and nature have not stable relationship, neither they are necessarily the same of the intellect laws in the rational sense. The lezamian metaphor involves instability, dynamism and progressive change. It is not about the reproduction of the world, but the creation of a world. That is why what is dark in the poem, far from being an obstacle, is a necessary incitement, because poetry is precisely an invitation to know what is unknown, to know what does not yet have sense. (The translation is mine)

follows “the footprints of a re-encounter” by the poetic image. My work followed answer the question about the extent to which Lezama either becomes attached to the disillusioned conception of the lost time, common in his models such as Luis de Góngora y Argote, or on the other hand he combines this perspective also presenting his individual bet as a chosen way of restoring the historic and personal time by means of the insular nature image. The work was supported by the bakhtinian concept of chronotope with the purpose of a visualization of the space and time connections in the lezamian poetic, the time concept of Plato, and also the research of Mircea Eliade about the sacred time and modern human’s lineal time.

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