

## **Political independence and self-criticism: R.W. Emerson's voice in José Martí's "Nuestra América"**

The American thinker and writer who inspired José Martí most during his exile in New York from 1880 to 1895 was without doubt R. W. Emerson. The Cuban poet dedicated a lengthy article to the North American writer in 1882 on the occasion of Emerson's death. In my presentation, I will show to what extent the American transcendentalist became a model for the Cuban poet with regard to political independence but also to cultural self-criticism in postcolonial America. I will base my arguments on Emerson's essays such as "The American Scholar," "English Traits," and others, and I will demonstrate how they are linked to Martí's most pronounced call for political and cultural independence in his essay "Nuestra América." I will also allude to the Latin American postcolonial critic Roberto Fernández Retamar and his vision of José Martí as a forerunner of socialist freedom fighters.

After his traumatic experiences in colonial Cuba and several years of travels in Europe and Latin America, Martí arrived in New York in 1880 and was surprised to find a nation that was prospering economically and materially, but lacked pride in its own culture and its own achievements. He was astonished to witness how little self-esteem North Americans had concerning their young culture and democracy and how much they looked to Europe in search for their own roots and identity even though they could count cultural and political icons such as Emerson or Lincoln among themselves. Martí wrote in 1885:

From the United States, the female heirs go to England to marry the lords; no young man from New York considers himself baptized in elegance if he does not

drink water from London; people paint and write, dress and walk in the London style, while Emerson thinks, Lincoln dies, and the captains in war blue and with bright eyes look to the ocean and triumph. They have grandeur at home, and like good fools they despise it because it is from home. Even the ant, the humble ant, is nobler than the parakeet and the monkey.

[De los Estados Unidos se van las herederas a Inglaterra, a casarse con los lores; ningún galán neoyorquino se cree bautizado en elegancia si no bebe agua de Londres; a la Londres se pinta y escribe, se viste y se pasea, se come y se bebe, mientras Emerson piensa, Lincoln muere, y los capitanes de azul de Guerra y ojos claros miran al mar y triunfan. La grandeza tienen en casa, y como buenos imbéciles, porque es de casa la desdeñan. Hasta la hormiga, la mísera hormiga, es más noble que la cotorra y el mono.] (X, 298)<sup>1</sup>

Relating the issue of a cultural inferiority complex to an analogy in nature is vintage Martí. By claiming that an ant is “nobler than the parakeet and the monkey,” Martí alludes to the Emersonian concept of the absence of contradictions in nature and that the value of creatures does not depend on their size. It is also reminiscent of Emerson’s poem “The fable,” in which a squirrel maintains that it is not inferior to a mountain regardless its size. This view also reflects Martí’s conviction of the equality and sovereignty of nations independent of their size.

It is indicative that Martí mentions Emerson in his reflections on cultural inferiority. The transcendentalist not only inspired Martí as a writer and poet, but he also

---

<sup>1</sup> Martí’s quotes have been taken from *Obras Completas*. Havana: Editorial Nacional de Cuba, 1963-73. They are henceforth indicated by the Roman numerical for the volume and the Arabic number for the page.

became the model for his call for Latin America's cultural and political independence from Spain.

Emerson's vision about cultural independence might best be conveyed by his influential essays "The American scholar" and "English traits." Martí had read both of them as some of his allusions in his essay on Emerson reveal. "The American Scholar" calls for a new confidence in U.S. culture because, as Emerson claims, "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" (Emerson, Complete Works I, 114). Then he continues:

The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. [...] We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a was of defence and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men. (Emerson, Complete Works I, 114-115)

As in his essay "Self-reliance", Emerson stresses the confidence in the Self and declares that "if the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him" (115).

In "The American Scholar", Emerson draws a parallel between individual and political emancipation, which he considers analogous developments:

Another sign of our times, also marked by an analogous political movement, is the new importance given to the single person. Every thing that tends to insulate the individual,--to surround him with barriers of natural respect, so that each man

shall feel the world is his, and man shall treat with man as a sovereign state with a sovereign state,--tends to true union as well as greatness. (113)

Emerson's thoughts about the fair treatment among sovereign states found their correspondence in Martí's repeatedly expressed emphasis on the right to sovereignty for the fledgling Latin American countries against hegemonic U.S. and European aspirations.

Emerson's call for the sovereignty of nations finds its most distinct echo in Martí's 1891 essay "Nuestra América," which Roberto Fernández Retamar considers "the most important document published in America from the end of the past century until the appearance in 1962 of the Second Declaration of Havana" (17-18). "Nuestra América" indeed represents a powerful denunciation of colonialism and an unequivocal stance for Latin American independence from whatever foreign power. It portrays the injustices of the Spanish conquest and the colonial period, which led to a socially, politically and economically fractured continent and loss of national identity. In "Our America," Martí hints at despotic colonialism as the root of the evil in Latin America:

America began suffering and still suffers from the fatigue from reconciling the discordant and hostile elements it inherited from a perverse, despotic colonizer, and from the imported forms and ideas that have, in their lack of local reality, delayed the advent of a logical form of government. The continent, deformed by three centuries of a rule that denied man the right to exercise his reason, introduced—ignoring and refusing to listen to the ignorant masses that had helped it redeem itself—a government based on reason. (Allen 292)

[Entró a padecer América, y padece, de la fatiga de acomodación entre los

elementos discordantes y hostiles que heredó de un colonizador despótico y avieso y las ideas y formas importadas que han venido retardando, por su falta de realidad local, el gobierno lógico. El continente, descoyuntado durante tres siglos por un mando que negaba el derecho del hombre al ejercicio de su razón, entró, desatendiendo, desoyendo a los ignorantes que lo habían ayudado a redimirse, en un gobierno que tenía por base la razón]. (VI, 19)

Martí deploras the “imported forms and ideas” of the “perverse, despotic colonizer,” which are incompatible with the “local reality” of Latin America. This vision is repeated by Retamar who condemns Latin America’s “subjection to the colonialist perspective of history that has been imposed on us, causing names, dates, circumstances, and truths to vanish from our consciousness” (19).

Martí’s anticolonial stance takes up a considerable part of “Nuestra América,” which is why Retamar claims that “for consistency in our anticolonialist attitude we must in effect turn to those of our people who have incarnated and illustrated that attitude in their behavior and thinking. And for this, there is no case more useful than that of Martí” (18-19). To prove his point, Retamar focuses on a key passage of “Nuestra América,” where Martí expresses his rejection of European learning and his praise of the “American university:”

The European university must yield to the American university. The history of America, from the Incas to the present, must be taught letter perfect, even if that of the Argonauts is not taught. Our own Greece is preferable to that Greece that is not ours. We have greater need of it. National politicians must replace foreign and exotic politicians. Graft the world onto our re-

publics, but the trunk must be that of our republics. And let the conquered pedant be silent: there is no homeland of which the individual can be more proud than our unhappy American republics. (Retamar 21)

[La universidad europea ha de ceder a la universidad americana. La historia de América, de los incas acá, ha de enseñarse al dedillo, aunque no se enseñe la de los arcontes de Grecia. Nuestra Grecia es preferible a la Grecia que no es nuestra. No es más necesaria. Los políticos nacionales han de reemplazar a los políticos exóticos. Injértese en nuestras repúblicas el mundo; pero el tronco ha de ser el de nuestras repúblicas. Y calle el pedante vencido; que no hay patria en que pueda tener el hombre más orgullo que en nuestras dolorosas repúblicas americanas.] (VI, 18)

In this passage, Martí proposes that American culture and history replace the European curriculum because America needs to rely on its own culture. In addition, he mentions the highly developed society of the Incas whose culture can be compared to that of the ancient Greeks, the cradle of European civilization. Martí was an admirer of the ancient Latin American cultures such as the Aztecs, Mayas, or Incas. Retamar views Martí's insistence on the American university as exemplary of his rejection of foreign culture, but this vision reveals inconsistencies. On the one hand, he points out "Martí's identification with our aboriginal culture" (20) and his rejection of European ideas, but on the other hand he proposes the socialist concept of Marx, Lenin, and Engels for Latin America ignoring that those ideas were born from a specific European situation, namely the industrial exploitation of the working classes.

Emerson's clearest call for cultural independence while implicitly criticizing his compatriot's lack of self-confidence comes in the opening lines of "The American Scholar" when Emerson appeals to his compatriots to stop learning from other countries and to remember the cultural potential of their own young country:

Perhaps the time is already come [...] when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. (81-82)

Using imagery from nature ("harvest"), Emerson asserts that the U.S. has outgrown its characteristic as a "mechanical" nation, which feeds on the intellectual exploits of other countries, and that it is ready to assume a new, independent role of thinking.

Another one of Emerson's essays that sent a boost to Martí's efforts to gain cultural and political independence of Cuba, was "English Traits" (1856), in which Emerson calls for a new assertiveness for cultural self-esteem for the U.S. Martí knew this essay and mentions Emerson, who "saw old England, land of his Puritan fathers, and set his impressions down in another book, a powerful book, which he titled *English Traits*" [vio a la vieja Inglaterra de donde le vinieron sus padres puritanos, y de su visita hizo otro libro, fortísimo libro, que llamó *Rasgos ingleses*] (XIII, 28).

"English Traits" is the result of Emerson's impressions of three journeys to England. It reflects his fascination with England, but also his awareness of the U.S. being different from the mother country. In his sketches of British authors, he describes

Coleridge as “old and preoccupied, and could not bend to a new companion and think with him” (Harvey 98). Wordsworth gave him the “impression of a narrow and very English mind; of one who paid for his rare elevation by general tameness and conformity” (Harvey 98).

In “English Traits,” Emerson reflects on the merits and deficiencies of the parent country in respect to his own. He acknowledges English individualism and solidity of character, but criticizes overly entrenched traditions. He voices admiration for English industry and mechanical know-how, but he also deplors the alienation of the laborer and the inequalities of a rigid class system. The subtext of “English Traits” seems to be the inevitable ascendancy of the younger nation, the U.S., over England, the older one. According to Emerson, the English have learned much by opposing, and Americans will learn even more by opposing them (Hutch 114).

Emerson considers English literature mediocre, at best “common sense inspired” (Harvey 100). He claims that in “the absence of the highest aims, of the pure love of knowledge and the surrender to nature, there is the suppression of the imagination, the priapism of the senses and the understanding” (Harvey 100). Chapter 16 of “English Traits”—“Stonehenge”—contains Emerson's most succinct musing upon the essential contrast between America and England:

I saw everywhere in the country proofs of sense and spirit, and success of every sort: I like the people: they are good and they are handsome; they have everything, and can do everything: but meantime, I surely know, that, as soon as I return to Massachusetts, I shall lapse at once into the feeling, which the geography of America inspires, that we play the game with immense advantage; that there and

not here is the seat and the centre of the British race; and that no skill or activity can long compete with the prodigious natural advances of that country, in the hands of the same race; and that England, an old and exhausted island, must one day be contended, like other parents, to be strong only in her children. (Harvey 100)

In "English Traits" Emerson alludes to British imperialism and asserts that while "traditions and usages" of liberty are salutary, the Englishman is too inclined to "force his island by-laws down the throat of great countries, like India, China, Canada, [and] Australia" and is given to smugness (Harvey 100).

In "Nuestra América" and in his famous "North American scenes," Martí assumes a role similar to Emerson's in "English Traits." Whereas Emerson tries to elevate U.S. culture by comparing it with old England, Martí's vignettes depict the character of the U.S. and contrast it with Spanish America. In a sense, they proclaim the bilateral existence of the two Americas, and they encourage Latin Americans to sit at the continental table as equals. Just as Emerson calls for pride in North American culture and autonomy, Martí's writings on the U.S. serve to define distinct characteristics of Latin America as opposed to North America and Europe.

At the end of a personal crisis, on 18 March 1838, Emerson said in a journal entry that if one did not cast aside all other sort of consciousness but one's own, then one would be like a "son who should always suck at his mother's teat"(Hutch 105). His goal was to achieve a national culture of the United States of America and his philosophy reigned supreme as a statement of national achievement during the second half of the nineteenth century. Emerson remained a central ideologist of American self-understanding during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Hutch 105).

In another note in his journals, Emerson wrote in 18 March 1838, to "accept another man's consciousness" for one's own was for Americans to be like "permanent embryos which received all their nourishment through the umbilical cord" that continued to be fruitlessly attached to Mother England. The sons of the first generation of American fathers had to grow up; they had to go beyond the past, to transcend old styles of thought. To cling to colonial consciousness after the severance brought about by the War of Independence begun in 1776, was merely for sons to mimic "sincere persons who live in shams" (Hutch 112-113).

Emerson's criticism of Americans "mimicking" European culture is also reflected in Martí's "Nuestra América," when he alludes to the specific relationship of the Latin American *criollo* class to their homeland emerges at the beginning of the second section of that article. Here, Martí uses a series of negatively inflected metaphors to describe the social elite class who is unable to contribute to the anti-imperial struggle:

Only runts whose growth was stunted will lack the necessary valor, for those who have no faith in their land are like men born prematurely. Having no valor themselves, they deny that other men do. Their puny arms, with bracelets and painted nails, the arms of Madrid or of Paris, cannot manage the lofty tree and so they say the tree cannot be climbed. We must load up the ships with these termites who gnaw away at the core of the patria that has nurtured them; if they are Parisians or Madrileños then let them stroll to the Prado by lamplight or go to Tortoni's for an ice. (Allen 289)

[A los sietemesinos sólo les faltará el valor. Los que no tienen fe en su tierra son hombres de siete meses. Porque les falta el valor a ellos, se lo

niegan a los demás. No les alcanza al árbol difícil el brazo canijo, el brazo de uñas pintadas y pulsera, el brazo de Madrid o de París, y dicen que no se puede alcanzar el árbol. Hay que cargar los barcos de esos insectos dañinos, que le roen el hueso a la patria que los nutre. Si son parisienses o madrileños, vayan al Prado, de faroles, o vayan a Tortoni, de sorbetes.] (VI, 16)

Through a baroque string of metaphors, the cosmopolitan is characterized as a feminized, premature infant incapable of contributing to the construction of the nation. His nail-painted hand and braceleted arm are barely strong enough to reach the tree's first branch, let alone able to cut down the tree and build it into a barricade (Belnap 192). Martí uses the tree as a metaphor for Latin America alluding to its strength, strong roots and capacity to protect. But the weak *criollo* is plagued by skepticism and cannot deal with the tree. Lacking the strength and courage to labor himself, he insists that the task is impossible. And like a harmful insect, this skeptical attitude eats away into the marrow of the resolve of building a nation and causes decay in the strength of others. Martí offers a drastic response to these kinds of people: Load them onto boats and send them off to the metropolitan centers with which they identify.

In his essay on Emerson, Martí exhibits a profound knowledge of the North American writer's work including his poetry and his prose writings. Martí alludes to several of Emerson's essays that focus on the notion of American cultural and political independence from England thus revealing his own preoccupation with the Spanish empire dominating Latin America. Through his reading of Emerson, Martí found the justification for his own opposition against the European colonization of the Americas

even if it meant armed conflict. Emerson became the catalyst in Martí's campaign for an independent Latin America.

### Works cited

- Allen, Esther. *José Martí: Selected Writings*. New York: Penguin, 2002.
- Belnap, Jeffrey. "Headbands, Hemp Sandals, and Headdresses: The Dialectics of Dress and Self-Conception in Martí's "Our America"." Ed. Raúl Fernández. Durham: Duke UP, 1998. 191-209.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Complete Works*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-04.
- Harvey A. Bruce. "Ralph Waldo Emerson." *American Travel Writers, 1776-1864*. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1997. Vol. 183 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Ed. James Schramer and Donald Ross. 96-102.
- Hutch, Richard A. "Ralph Waldo Emerson." *American Philosophers Before 1950*. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 2003. Vol. 270 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. 103-17.
- Martí José. *Martí José: Crónicas*. Ed. Susana Rotker. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1993.
- Obras Completas*. Havana: Editorial Nacional de Cuba, 1963-73.
- Retamar Roberto Fernández. *Calibán and Other Essays*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.