

## *Culture in Cuba*

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I flew out to Cuba in January as guest of the Casa de las Américas, an organization roughly corresponding to the British Council, but with a lively publishing house appended, also a first-class literary magazine. I was invited to form one of a jury of five to judge the annual poetry prize open to unpublished books from any part of Spanish America. Prizes are also offered for the novel, book of short stories, drama and sociological essay, and juries were assembled from various countries for each. I was the only British juror. The beat poet Allen Ginsberg from the USA was my colleague on the poetry panel. The rest were entirely from Spanish America or Spain.

The first thing to impress me was the educational drive. Actual illiteracy has been more or less abolished, though classes were still being held at

breakfast time in the bowels of our huge hotel for the hard core backward readers and calculators among the staff. The lift-men, by contrast persistently read on the job, carrying one past one's floor to the next full stop. The slogan is 'All to the sixth grade!', and the schools were what the Cubans most wanted us to see. Six years of free education with books, food, clothing, and, where necessary, board in the former houses of the rich, lead on to scholarships as far as a child can go. This overhauls Mexico, hitherto educationally the most advanced country in Latin America. Education is really universal in Cuba; Mexico is still trying to ensure that there will, in fact, be a place for every child. In Mérida, which I visited afterwards, there clearly wasn't. 'All to the sixth grade' entails much adult education. The newspapers carry frequent quizzes; if you can't answer them, then you haven't reached the sixth grade standard. The need for new teachers is consequently very great, and youngsters are sent out to work in the village schools at 14 or 15, to be brought back for refresher courses after a couple of years. New schools are being put up rapidly, two of the largest on former barrack sites, one on the edge of Havana, and another deep in the country.

Early results of the educational drive can already be seen in the bookshops. Several publishing houses, pursuing different editorial policies but all ultimately under state control, are producing and selling as many books as paper stringency will allow. Particularly interesting are cheap editions of the 'modern classics', which sell more quickly than anything else: Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Hemingway, the short stories of Julio Cortázar (a very fine Argentinian novelist), and the collected poetry of Luis Cernuda and Antonio Machado (recent Spanish poets of the first rank). The literary taste, even of the young, seems to be conservative. A girl student produced a typed copy of *The Waste Land*—Eliot's poems are, like most English books, unobtainable—and asked me to help out her inadequate English. Eliot and Dylan Thomas are the last two English names generally known.

Culturally Cuba remains in the American orbit. The best Cuban writing, the short stories of Calvert Casey, Cabrera Infante—who has just won the *Biblioteca Breve* prize in Barcelona—Onelio Cardoso, Humberto Arenal, and of the new generation who have started writing since the Revolution, are all distantly modelled on those of the Americans from Sherwood Anderson onwards; a small group of the very young, however, is beginning to experiment with science-fiction and 'sick' fantasy. This strong influence from the North is explained by the fact that many intellectuals fled to the United States at the height of the Batista oppression, and consequently read English as easily as Spanish. But Spanish influence also persists. The Cuban poets know and discuss the work of their Spanish contemporaries, as the Mexicans do not. Writing in the Spanish ballad metres also continues; the Communist daily *Hoy* prints topical poems in this form, and one or two old-time balladists submitted their work to our competition. They had the droll appeal of our own late William MacGonagall.

The Cuban poets follow the French tradition from Apollinaire, with occasional hints of surrealism. The hermetic school whose influence was great before the Revolution continues to be respected. None of

these poets has gone into exile. Indeed, the best and most difficult of them, José Lezama Lima, whose poetry is about to be republished, was a member of our jury. Cuban poetry, however, lags behind events. The batch of poems that celebrated the defeat of the invaders at the Bay of Pigs was flatly though excitedly patriotic. The best—in fact the only adequate—tribute to those who died in the Fidelist campaigns or in Batista's jails in *Libro de los heroes* by the present cultural attaché in London, Pablo Armando Fernández. It contains some very fine poems. The other three outstanding poets of the younger generation, Roberto Fernández Retamar, Fayad Jamis and Heberto Padilla, write best on subjects only indirectly political. Cuba awaits its Mayakovsky.

The novels which have attempted in the chunky dos Passos manner to cover the years of the dictatorship and the rise of the Fidelist movement—*La situación*, the first of a planned trilogy by Lisandro Otero, is perhaps the best—concentrate on the decadence of the rich and the corruption of the politicians. But accounts of *la dolce vita*, however well done, don't add up to a revolutionary novel. Most of the writers see things from a middle-class angle. The best of the intellectuals, of course, joined the Revolution. But for an account of the change of spirit that is taking place, one must look to some unknown peasant or militiaman who is still learning his craft. An afternoon at a reading at the Writers' Union left me in no doubt that such people exist. The questions were practical and to the point.

Culturally Havana is lively, with folk-ballet, experimental and national theatres, and plenty of films from the Eastern countries, France and Italy . . . The night clubs are full, and the cabaret is topical. For the first time all this is for the Cuban, not the tourist. But there is little anti-gringoism, far less than in Mexico where the American, tourist or business man or cultural busybody, is a brooding and insensitive presence.

The atmosphere of our hotel was pleasantly relaxed, though some of the jurors had risked considerable penalties to come. Everyone is photographed by CIA agents in Mexico airport, the only place in the New World from which planes leave for Cuba; and reports are sent to the police of such countries as Colombia and Venezuela which forbid their citizens to visit Cuba. Since I went on to Mexico and afterwards returned to Cuba, several states, perhaps even the USA itself, will refuse me a visa. The USA, however, allowed Allen Ginsberg to make the journey after his attorney had put the case that the visit was for him a professional necessity.

Politically, we were of all colours and none. The Spanish novelist Camilo José Cela is a close friend of the Spanish Minister of Culture and Tourism, Fraga Iribarne. We had in fact been chosen as writers, and by no other standards. Our early discussions were gloomy. The level of typescripts was deplorably low. After reading the first 28 anonymous submissions, I felt that it would be impossible to give a prize. Every miliciano in Cuba seemed to imagine himself a poet; every betrayed mistress in Peru and Colombia confided her sorrows to our Concurso in verse. Nos. 29 and 30, which came from Argentina, raised my hopes. In

the event 29 won, and 30 was commended. Only one other, also an Argentinian, impressed us as a really original poet. The winner, Victor Eduardo García Robles, claims to have written vast numbers of books, all unpublished. He is a poet of great power and a tremendous vigour and breadth of language. Though he sometimes lapses into rhetoric, he has a hard sense of social facts. One of his best poems is entitled 'Every man has his own small budgetary requirements'; its subject is the cost of living, psychological as well as pecuniary. Another of his best pieces dares the theme of Hamlet and Ophelia—successfully. He, as well as the two other Argentinians whom we unanimously recommended, will be published later in the year. He receives moreover a prize of 1,000 pesos, the equivalent of 1,000 US dollars. Publication in Cuba does not preclude him from also being published elsewhere.

The short-story committee unanimously selected a collection which proved to be by a well-known and first-class Uruguayan writer, J. C. Onetti. No prize was awarded for the novel; the best submitted was by a Cuban who presented the Revolution from an unfamiliar angle, that of the refugees in Miami. As much as I saw of it was on the *dolce vita* theme: a brilliant but unpleasant account of juvenile exhibitionism. The prizes for the drama and the essay were also awarded; both, I believe, to Cubans. From the start we were assured by the director of the Casa de las Américas, Haydee Santamaría, that our choice was free, and some of the delegates had the opportunity of discussing with President Dorticos the possibility of extending the field of entries to include books published in the preceding year.

The Casa's magazine, a bi-monthly, presents Cuban writing in an international perspective. Its standards are high; in fact it is better and more consistent than any literary periodical in Britain. *Unión*, the organ of the Writers Union, is a little more consciously of the Left, but catholic in its choice of writers. The monthly *Gaceta de Cuba*, presents and criticizes new writing on a more popular level. In fact a literate public is growing and being catered for. Not only are new writers coming forward, but the old and established authors, Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, Eliseo Diego and José Lezama Lima are being re-read and reprinted. The Cuban revolution, unlike some others, has not rejected the best writers of the past. Fidel, in fact, in his address to the Intellectuals of 1962, made a particular appeal to those who were not Revolutionaries; they seem on the whole to have responded. This is to my mind, yet another hopeful feature of the cultural life of 'the first country of Latin America to gain its complete independence'.