

JOSÉ MARTÍ: REBEL WITHOUT HATRED

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*To Maria Mantilla's
son. very sincerely
del Regato*

"The American Nation -- wrote José Martí -- is the most ample home that human decorum has yet built for itself." From New York City, where he lived in exile during more than a third of his lifetime, this eloquent reporter, poet and revolutionary, wrote about everything American, in beautiful Spanish. Most of his writings have never been translated into English.

Born in Cuba in 1853, the son of Spanish nationals, José Martí, through sheer eloquence, abnegation, and love of freedom, became the recognized Apostle of Cuban independence from Spain. When only fifteen years of age he was already the editor of a school paper "La Patria Libre", supporting the Cuban insurgents who were to fight for ten years without success for Cuba's independence. At sixteen he was arrested on suspicion of disloyalty to Spain, and, having assumed full responsibility for his acts in a show of patriotic oratory during his trial, Martí was condemned to forced labor for challenging the authority of the colonial power. Shackled in heavy iron chains which ulcerated his ankles, he worked in a quarry near Havana, where his eyes were badly burned by the lime, while his convictions were enforced. A petition of his mother, on account of his youth, changed his sentence to exile in Spain. Madrid, with its libraries, theaters, literary gatherings, et cetera, gave him a cultural opportunity which fascinated the young Cuban patriot and made him fall in love with the country of his ancestors; he found sympathetic audiences that would listen when his stifled indignation would burst in evocation of enslaved Cuba, and when all the sorrow pent up within his soul would take the form of a cascade of boiling eloquent phrases.

Between Madrid and Zaragoza, Martí completed his secondary school credits and a Licentiate in Philosophy and Letters. And he also acquired a clearer understanding of his own artistic sentiments as reflected in his poetry, his literary criticisms, his opinions on art, his philosophical pronouncements.

In 1875, Martí travelled to Mexico where he worked as a journalist and espoused the ideas of the heirs of Benito Juárez. The Indian was a revelation to Martí; he was alarmed to see him standing still in the Mexican scene and afraid that his weight might become a burden. In Mexico he wrote a theater play and met a beautiful young Cuban from Camagüey, Señorita Carmen Zayas-Bazán, to whom he became engaged. To his disappointment a successful revolt in Mexico brought Porfirio Díaz to power. As a journalist he had carried his convictions to dangerous extremes, not out of partisanship but out of loyalty to his concept of man: his right to participate in inner discussions was questioned. The hospitality he enjoyed being no longer spontaneous and frank, he decided to leave Mexico for Guatemala where he was offered a position at the Teachers' College. He became a professor in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Guatemala and worked on a book in which he captured the beauties of the land and sang the virtues of the people of Guatemala.

Martí, at twenty-five, had short curly hair receding on his pale forehead, a mustache that accentuated his smile and a far-away expression in his slanted eyes; to this was added his command of language, his courtliness, and the romantic halo of a restless exile with intense noble aspirations. Martí became a regular attendant at the tertulias held in the home of General García-Granados. María García-Granados, the General's daughter, a young lady of melancholy dark eyes and caressing voice, was attracted to Martí. When he travelled to Mexico and returned a married man, María's unexpected death was announced. In tender verses that he wrote later, Martí

immortalized la Niña de Guatemala:

"She entered the river at dusk;
the doctor brought her out dead.
They said she died of a chill
I know that she died of love."

In 1878, the pact of Zanjón brought to an unsuccessful end Cuba's ten-year old war for independence, and Martí was able to return to his beloved home land. Among the Cubans that had not given up their hopes, he was sought for his qualities as an orator and he was fearless in expounding his views against autonomism even in the presence of Spanish officials. His revolutionary activities were closely watched, and one year after his return he was again deported to Spain. But this time he rapidly escaped to France and thence to New York where he arrived in January, 1880. For the next fifteen years New York was his home and the center of his feverish intellectual and revolutionary activities.

Martí wrote regularly for "La Opinión Nacional" of Caracas and "La Nación" of Buenos Aires; his long articles on varied subjects were read by thousands who came to depend on him to explain the United States of America. "There is nothing in Spanish that resembles Martí's roaring style -- said Sarmiento, of Argentina -- after Victor Hugo, France has nothing to offer to equal his metallic resonance." According to the contemporary Chilean poetess, Gabriela Mistral, the United States owes Martí a debt of gratitude, for he wrote the best articles on American life that have ever been written in South America, both in literary quality and in his concern to conciliate and unite. The events of the day, the assassination of Garfield, the inauguration of the Brooklyn Bridge, a lecture delivered by Oscar Wilde, the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty, a pastoral letter of the Methodist bishop, the Charleston earthquake and innumerable other events became vehicles to expound his views.

Those who will read his melodic prose will note the contrast between his tender expressions and his powerful virility.

In 1882, upon the death of Emerson, Martí wrote the most beautiful tribute to the great American:

"Emerson has died and our eyes fill with sweet tears; his passing gives us not pain but envy, it does not swell our chest with anguish but with tenderness... Emerson was a subtle observer who wrote as he saw... His pen was not like a painter's brush but like a sculptor's chisel. He did not argue, he established. He purified, refined, distilled and took only the essence."

Whether on love letters or in his articles, Martí lets us often see his own preoccupations and anxieties:

"...because to live is suffering, I live. I live because I must be stronger than every obstacle and every valor...I must find in my soul an explanation, a desire,...a just motive, a noble cause for my existence." And elsewhere: "The spirit travels in life like the hunted fawn, without time to inhale the vivifying air, nor to take a taste of the juicy young shoots, nor to satiate his thirst in the brook which, like melted light, runs in the woods."

A New York publication, "The Hour", sought Martí as an art critic; of a painting of the crucifixion he wrote:

"The artist does not portray Christ in his conquering charity, nor in his captivating resignation, nor in his immaculate forgiveness for which there is no capacity in human nature...he sees Jesus, rather, as the invincible power and incarnation of an idea, broadcasting a clean and clear beauty which comes into the souls and makes itself felt in them."

In 1887, he wrote an obituary on Walt Whitman:

"Not since the sacred books of antiquity has there been a doctrine, comparable in apocalyptic language and sinewed poetry, to that of this old poet whose grandiose and priestly utterances erupt like sunbursts...he is the most fearless, comprehensive and spontaneous poet of his age. He describes truth as a passionate lover who invades its body and unbuttons its clothing in possessive anxiety. His language has seemed lewd to those who are incapable of understanding his greatness; fools with the affected modesty of prurient schoolboys...Whitman's method is that of accumulation...he evokes melancholy, like the savages, by repetition...his reasoning never takes the pedestrian form of argument...instead, he uses the mystery of insinuation, the fervor of certitude and the igniting shift of prophecy."

Charles Dana asked Martí to write for "The Sun" and having to translate the Spanish copy, complained of his own inability to render justice to Martí's prose. Martí, in turn, translated into Spanish several American books; his translation of the novel "Ramona" by Helen Hunt achieved a beauty of spontaneity and of graceful classical turns, which is said to have surpassed the original.

Obligated to accept separation from his beloved son, Martí wrote a book of poems dedicated to him: "Son, I take refuge in you...These rivulets that flowed through my heart, may they touch yours." His verses are a rare mixture of simplicity and naked originality, bearing a tender emotion with adorable innocence. The soft rhythm of his verses has been described, by Unamuno, as the most varied in the Spanish language. Unlike many of his Latin contemporaries, Martí did not pose as a misunderstood and tormented poet: his was a cry of alarm with a loving exhortation.

And as though this intellectual activity was only a sideline, Martí worked incessantly for the liberation of Cuba. His interest transcended the ordinary inclinations of the romantic poets and extended from sociology to economics, from education to government. Writing about the Chicago Hay-market Riots he said of the anarchists:

"Those who sow arson and treason because of hate for the prosperity of others, deserve only pity...In no honest soul does the thirst for justice precipitate into crime..."

Yet when the anarchists were summarily condemned, Martí felt that their guilt had not been proven and he raised his voice in protest, warning that the Republic had fallen into the injustice and violence of monarchies.

Of Karl Marx, Martí wrote that he was not only a titanic mover of the anger of European workers but also a profound seer of the reasons of

human misery. But he also wrote that Marxism had two basic dangers:

"...that of extraneous, confused and incomplete interpretations and ... that of the pride and dissimulated violence of ambitious men who claim to be defenders of the helpless in order to raise themselves over their shoulders."

Máximo Gómez and Antonio Maceo, veterans of the ten-year war, had failed in their attempts to foment a new movement for Cuban independence. Calixto García made an unsuccessful start, known in Cuban history as "la Guerra chiquita". Martí organized the Cuban Revolutionary Party which, at last, unified the exiles in a single purpose and the revolutionary ferment was in action again. He founded and published "Patria", the official organ of the party. He travelled incessantly to Mexico, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Panamá, and Santo Domingo to heal the wounds and reconcile the differences among Cuban patriots; and he went frequently to Tampa and Key-West where the exiled Cuban cigar makers became powerful supporters of the party:

"To free the Cubans we work, not to corral them...Their rights as men is what Cubans expect from independence."

There were fences to mend, quarrels to reconcile, funds to be raised, rôles to be agreed upon; in all of this he was the key personality involved. There were those concerned with the rise of the Negro in liberated Cuba; Martí vehemently contended:

"If in things concerning my country I should be given the choice of one good over all others, I should want the cornerstone of our Republic to be the devotion of Cubans to the full dignity of man... Either the Republic has as its formation the basic character of everyone of its sons ... respecting, as if it were a matter of family honor, the unrestricted freedom of others ...or else the Republic would not be worth a single one of the tears of our women nor a solitary drop of a brave man's blood. The soul emanates equal and eternal from bodies that are diverse in form and color. He sins against humanity who propagates antagonism and hate between the races. Treacherous assassin, ingrate to God and enemy of men is he who, under pretext of directing the new generations, shows them an isolated cumulus of absolute doctrines and preaches to their ear the barbarous gospel of hate rather than the sweet conversation of love."

An article appeared favoring annexation of Cuba to the United States and referring to Cubans as effeminate and incapable of assuming the responsibilities of citizenship. Prompt to the ripost, Martí wrote to the Editor of the Evening Post:

"We should have renewed our efforts if it were not for those among us who favored annexation and held the unmanly hope of obtaining liberty without paying the necessary price for it; and, also, if it were not for others who feared ... that our blood soaked ruins would serve no other end than to fertilize the soil for the growth of a foreign plant."

And tirelessly he admonished his compatriots of the difficulties and pitfalls that lay ahead:

"Our fatherland demands sacrifices, it is an altar, not a pedestal ... Only the wealth which is created and the liberty that is conquered with one's own hands is lasting and good ... Our wine is bitter, but it is our wine."

Cuban exiles everywhere were readying themselves for the fight on Cuban soil and the long preparations were coming to an end. Three secretly loaded boats containing a moderate arsenal were to leave Florida to pick up Cubans in Central America and Caribbean islands and eventually land in Cuba. At the last minute a denunciation resulted in an embargo and confiscation by United States authorities. The fiasco of La Fernandina broke Martí's usual composure and threatened to discredit the revolutionaries; but the news of the formidable secret undertaking spurred the enthusiasm for the revolution:

"We have lost the Lagonda, the Amadís and the Baracoa, but by our good fortune, not lost is the self-respect of the Cubans."

A new expedition was prepared and financed with the remaining funds. And by general agreement, insurgents rose simultaneously in various places in Cuba, on February 24th, 1895. Antonio Maceo and many other Cuban patriots rushed to join the struggle; Martí went to Santo Domingo to make the last preparations with Máximo Gómez before landing in Cuba. In the small community

of Montecristi, Martí wrote a manifesto which they both signed, explaining to the world the legitimate cause of the Cuban revolution; it was Cuba's

Declaration of Independence, el Manifiesto de Montecristi:

"This war shall not foster disorder nor tyranny ... Those who foment and carry its voice declare before the fatherland their cleanliness from hate, their indulgence for the timid or mistaken Cubans, their respect for the dignity of man..."

Martí, ever conscious of his destiny, wrote several letters before sailing. One letter was addressed to an old Dominican friend, Federico Henríquez; its contents are considered as his political testament. In this letter he paid respectful tribute to Máximo Gómez, a foreigner who had fought and was preparing to fight again for Cuba:

"I write, deeply moved, in the silence of a home that, for the good of my country, will be today abandoned. The least that I can do in recognition of that virtue, is to face death ... in the company of the one who, because of my hands work and the common passions of our lands, leaves his happy home ... to face the enemy in my fatherland."

And he further affirmed:

"I evoked the war; my responsibility starts rather than ends with it. To me, the fatherland will never be triumph, but agony and duty."

He also wrote a tender letter to his old mother and a fatherly one to María Mantilla, a young New Yorker whom he regarded and loved as his own daughter: "A page a day, my dear little daughter... and wait for me as long as you know that I am living," and he added that he carried her picture as a shield.

Martí, Máximo Gómez and a handful of others eventually landed in Playitas, on the southern coast of Cuba, near its easternmost cape. From there, knapsack over the shoulder, they walked for four weeks, through some of the most beautiful but inhospitable region of the tropical island, the mountains of Baracoa, to meet with Maceo in La Mejorana. There it was agreed that the revolution would be governed by democratically elected regional

representatives of the people, Martí's thesis, and not by a military junta. Then they parted in different directions according to a plan. After a few more days of slow progress through muddy days and rainy nights the group of which Martí made part was surprised by the Spaniards. Ordered by Gómez to remain behind, Martí jumped on horseback and went forth to meet the enemy and the death for which he had long prepared.

Thus, at the age of forty-two, came to an end the life of this warrior who did not fire a shot. Martí was, without question, a man like few others. He did not aspire to a career as a writer, yet he became the outstanding Latin American writer of his time. He was a tender poet of adorable candid simplicity, but without narcissism or apparent preoccupation with method; he is now considered the initiator of Modernism in Spanish poetry. He lived as a foreigner in various countries, yet found it possible to love them all and to exalt their virtues rather than to reflect upon them the sad bitterness of his exile. He had the physiognomy of a romantic yet was not given to sterile lamentations but to vital affirmations with a nostalgia for innocence. Although disappointed in love, he did not write of women as treacherous beings but exalted them as the fountain of life. This revolutionary without hate, who drowned the pains of his apostolic endeavors in his militant love for man, this kneeling lover, this anxious father, has been justly called a saint of liberty, an apostle of freedom!

The seeds of Cuban independence were fertilized by the blood of this remarkable patriot: from October, 1895, to January, 1896, a sweeping

movement, hailed in Cuba as La Invasión, brought defeat to the Spanish armies wherever they were met in battle. Maceo and Máximo Gómez led the triumphant liberators from Baraguá, in the eastern province of the island, to Mantua, west of Havana. The difficult circumstances forced the Spanish authorities to make war use of barbed wire and to invent the concentration camps. Two years later the battleship Maine exploded in the Bay of Havana.