

## ORÍGENES GROUP AND JOURNAL

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■ **See also**

*De Donde Son los Cantantes* (Severo Sarduy)

Literature: Poetry in the Republican Period

Literature: Poetry in the Revolutionary Period

*Paradiso* (José Lezama Lima)

## ORÍGENES GROUP AND JOURNAL

*Jorge Luis Arcos*

*One of the most significant and controversial literary groups of twentieth-century Cuban literature.*

The Orígenes group was one of the most significant and controversial literary groups of twentieth-century Cuban culture. It took its name from the last of several journals that included *Verbum* (1937), *Espuela de Plata* (Silver Spur, 1939–1941), *Nadie Parecía* (No One Seemed, 1942–1944), *Clavileño* (1942–1943), and *Poeta* (Poet, 1942–1943). The Mexican writer Octavio Paz (1914–1998) described *Orígenes* as the most important Spanish-language periodical of its time. The journal was edited by José Lezama Lima (1910–1976) and José Rodríguez Feo (1897–1958) until a split between the two resulted in two different versions of the last two issues and the emergence of *Ciclón* (Cyclone), edited by Rodríguez Feo with the assistance of the *Orígenes* dissident Virgilio Piñera (1912–1979), favoring modernity and a different cultural orientation.

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Focused primarily on poetry, *Orígenes* was as noteworthy as *Contemporáneos* (Contemporaries), *Sur* (South), and *Revista de Occidente* (Western Review). It attempted to resolve the dualism between national and universal culture. To some extent, it strived to distinguish itself from the preceding generation, represented by the avant-garde *Revista Avance* (Progress Review); Lezama and Cintio Vitier (1921–2009) carried on an interesting polemic with Jorge Mañach (1898–1961), one of *Revista's* former editors-in-chief. Another of the previous generation's publications was the Marxist *Gaceta del Caribe* (Caribbean Gazette), whose first editorial, written anonymously by Mirta Aguirre (1912–1980), was the unnamed target of Lezama's first editorial in *Orígenes*.

It could be said that *Ciclón's* editorial profile was in direct opposition to the viewpoints presented in *Orígenes*, which was also to some extent true of the weekly *Lunes de Revolución* (Revolution Mondays), except that *Ciclón's* conflict with *Orígenes* was fueled by different aesthetic worldviews, whereas *Lunes de Revolución*, which emerged in 1959, had a dangerous political stance that attempted to identify a publication's orientation with the Revolution's incipient official culture.

**THE GROUP**

The Orígenes group consisted of ten poets who first achieved prominence in Vitier's anthology *Diez poetas cubanos (1937–1947)* (Ten Cuban Poets, 1948), which featured—in addition to Vitier himself—Lezama Lima, Piñera, Gastón Baquero (1914–1997), Justo Rodríguez Santos (1915–1999), Ángel Gaztelu (1914–2003), Eliseo Diego (1920–1994), Fina García-Marruz (b. 1923), Octavio Smith (b. 1921), and Lorenzo García Vega (b. 1926). The writer Roberto Fernández Retamar (b. 1930) was also frequently published in the journal, and the exiled Spanish writer María Zambrano (1904–1991), who was among the journal's most assiduous contributors, had considerable influence on the group. Her essay "La Cuba secreta" (The Secret Cuba, 1948) invested the Cuban poetry movement with a sort of philosophical metaphysics. Major painters such as Mariano Rodríguez (1912–1990) and René Portocarrero (1912–1985), the art critic Guy Pérez Cisneros (1915–1953), and the musician Julián Orbón (1912–1991) can also be considered part of the group; nevertheless, it was poetry—and specifically a poetic concept of reality—that characterized the Orígenes group and made it unique. Indeed, it was the group's painstaking poetic work that distinguished it from earlier and even contemporary tendencies (Arcos 2002).

There are two analytic perspectives of this group. The more traditional viewpoint links it directly to the existence of the previously mentioned journals, through the examination of many editorials written by Lezama (Lezama Lima) and books such as Vitier's *Lo*

*cubano en la poesía* (Cubanness in Poetry, 1958). The other perspective is that the group's influence lasted far beyond the journal's final issue and into a new age of Cuban literature following the triumph of the Revolution in 1959. In this construct, the group had a classic period linked to its journals and another, more controversial period during which Vitier and García-Marruz were the most widely accepted proponents (Vitier 1994; García-Marruz), all the way into the early years of the twenty-first century.

#### ORÍGENES IN THE REVOLUTION

In any case, the acceptance of the group disintegrated with the advent of that new period (Arcos 2007; Díaz). The negative criticism that began with *Ciclón* and was continued by *Lunes de Revolución* predominated until the early 1980s, thanks in part to the group's most notorious dissident, Piñera, and to the next generation, called the Fifties Generation or the first generation of the Revolution, which had new ideological tendencies that originated with *Gaceta del Caribe* and were represented by writers such as the Marxist critic Aguirre. In some sense, the triumph of the Revolution obliged the members of Orígenes to redefine their previous concept, called transcendentalist (Fernández Retamar), in light of the new political and literary context. Initially all of them enthusiastically welcomed the new revolutionary period—except for Baquero, who went into exile immediately, followed later by Orbón, Rodríguez Santos, Gaztelu, and García Vega. Very soon, however, Vitier, Diego, García-Marruz, and Smith took exception to the new government's atheist, Marxist orientation. In 1968 Vitier revealed his ideological conversion with the lecture "El violín" (The Violin), signaling the group's reinsertion into revolutionary culture, but not without reservations.

Likewise, in 1976, with the publication of García Vega's *Los años de Orígenes* (The Years of Orígenes), the group became aware of its most radical and thorough critic, this time from within. García Vega's condemnations persisted in his later memoir *El oficio de perder* (The Profession of Losing, 2004). In *El oficio de perder* García Vega begins taking apart Orígenes with a demystification of their iconography. In addition to his avant-garde aesthetic orientation and his severe criticism of the religious beliefs held by most of the group's members, García Vega injects a political analysis totally contrary to the criticisms made by *Lunes de Revolución*: García Vega attacks Orígenes' capitulation to the Castro government.

Following the controversial publication of his *Paradiso* (Paradise) in 1966, the main figure of the Orígenes group, José Lezama Lima, garnered positive reception with the release of *Poesía completa* (Complete Poetry, 1970), *La cantidad hechizada* (The Enchanted Quantity, 1970), and *Recopilación de textos* (Compilation of Texts, 1970), the latter being an anthology of his work, part of Casa de las Américas' Valoración Múltiple series. However, after the public self-criticism

in 1971 of Heberto Padilla (1932–2000) (related to the 1968 publication of his prizewinning book *Fuera del juego* [Out of the Game], for which Lezama had served on the award jury), Lezama was ostracized until his death in 1976. Piñera, his ideological adversary, suffered a similar fate, as did *Lunes de Revolución* critics Padilla, Antón Arrufat (b. 1935), Pablo Armando Fernández (b. 1930), and many others. In a sense, these dramatic events reconciled Lezama and Piñera, as well as Lezama and the part of the Fifties Generation that had been most critical of the Orígenes group; aesthetic differences aside, they had all become victims of an absolute and dogmatic political power.

#### REHABILITATION

Following the somber 1970s, known as the dark decade or the Five Grey Years (1971–1976), the Orígenes group experienced a revival among critics in books such as *En torno a la obra poética de Fina García-Marruz* (Concerning the Poetic Work of Fina García-Marruz, 1990), *La solución unitiva. Sobre el pensamiento poético de José Lezama Lima* (The Unifying Solution: On the Poetical Thought of José Lezama Lima, 1990), and *Orígenes: La pobreza irradiante* (Orígenes: Irradiant Poverty, 1994) by Jorge Luis Arcos. The well-known critic and essayist Enrique Saínz was one of the major contributors to this reinstatement. This legitimate and necessary rehabilitation in academic studies and publications responded to the political suspicion on the part of the Marxist cultural establishment, which had mistrusted the Orígenes group's religious or "idealistic" worldview; however, the reconsideration did not yet appreciate the group's nationalist projections.

But Orígenes' gradual reinsertion into Cuban culture, linked to international political events stemming from the end of the Cold War, made it possible for Vitier and García-Marruz to reinterpret the group on the basis of revolutionary ideological perspectives, thereby putting into effect Vitier's 1968 ideological "conversion," but it was not until after 1989, when the Revolution accentuated nationalism, that these reinterpretations received official acceptance (Vitier 1994; García-Marruz). With the colloquium honoring Orígenes's fiftieth anniversary, 1994 was the year when the group was fully admitted into the Revolution's academic and cultural world, and it marked the beginning of a new acceptance by young writers, especially members of the Diáspora(s) group, as well as Víctor Fowler and Antonio José Ponte. In 2002 Ponte published *El libro perdido de los origenistas* (The Lost Book of the Origenists), despite having given a controversial lecture in 1994 on García Vega's *Los años de Orígenes* and Vitier's *Ese sol del mundo moral* (The Sun of the Moral World). In the same vein, Duanel Díaz released *Los límites del origenismo* (The Limits of Origenism, 2005) in Madrid, and Rafael Rojas wrote several important essays viewing Orígenes from this new perspective, in line with Arcos's new studies on the Orígenes group (2002; 2007).

# Not For Sale

After the 1990s, Piñera's image was rehabilitated and García Vega's critical perspective and avant-garde creativity were recognized. The same is true of Baquero. Within this multiple and sometimes contradictory process, critics reconsidered some of Vitier's emblematic texts such as *Lo cubano en la poesía* and *Ese sol del mundo moral* (published in Mexico in 1975 and in Cuba in 1995), as well as García-Marruz's *La familia de Orígenes* (The Family of Orígenes, 1997). The latter two books are the clearest representations of the authors' revolutionary and nationalistic ethical reinterpretation, which have been rebuffed by their contemporaries. In this new context, in addition to the emblematic and, in one way or another, everlasting figure of Lezama Lima, his ideological adversary Piñera reemerged vigorously, and Baquero and especially García Vega have been read and studied much more frequently.

## ENDURING IMPORTANCE

But beyond these literary, ideological, and generational ups and downs, the group's internal dissidence, the multiple reinterpretations, the extra-literary interferences, and manipulation by critics, there are positive constants within the varying reactions to the Orígenes group. The most general of these is its universalist projection, coexisting with its Cuban style of poetry, which was in the end controversial and of relative value. Another constant is the writing quality, which its members faithfully upheld despite the hostile environment. Furthermore, the group had a capacity for reinventing itself, demonstrated by Lezama, Piñera, Baquero, and García Vega. Its capacity to create a poetic concept within its varied personal poetic styles continued to enlighten readers at the end of the twentieth century (Arcos 1999).

Antonio José Ponte's opinion advanced readers' appreciation of Orígenes' most admired efforts:

We prefer Orígenes in an open field, facing the elements, scratching at the stone of senselessness and nothingness, anxiously lost and gasping, to the improbable roads of Panglossianism. We prefer what we find in *Los años de Orígenes*, sickly pages that do not arrive at a single certainty, to the certainty we may find in *Ese sol del mundo moral*, for example.

Ponte p. 103

This evaluation, though somewhat distant from Orígenes' essentialism or transcendentalism, and paradoxically linked to modernity, ponders Piñera's and García Vega's avant-garde, experimental vocation and projection, together with an affinity between, for example, the poetry of Diáspora(s) and other writers and that formerly marginal or noncentral zone occupied by Orígenes. Added to this is both tendencies' radical distancing from the Revolution's ideology.

To a great extent, Lezama's protean capacity and furious singularity saved Lezama from these critical ups and downs. His open thought, his heterodox worldview, his inexhaustible universality, the intensity of his imagination—his strength, as the American critic Harold Bloom put it—are some of the traits that distinguish him from the other Orígenes members. The proliferation of academic studies of his work and the recognition he has received from his fellow writers attest to Lezama's work being an inexhaustible treasure. The Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges famously described Lezama as classic, but as Bloom explains in *The Western Canon*, he is a classic who has not yet depleted his original strangeness.

The singularity of a literary process within the context of the Cuban Revolution (inside or outside, exiled or not) has prolonged the controversy surrounding the Orígenes group, perhaps for too long. What should have been relegated to archaeology or a historical reference has defied deterioration because of that singularity. Nonetheless, the Orígenes group remained in the early 2000s one of the most intense and tragically polemic Cuban literary experiences, and some of its writers' works will forever be classics not only of Cuban letters, but of Ibero-American letters.

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