

1 April 1977

Professor John D. Martz, Editor
Latin American Research Review
316 Hamilton Hall
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, North Carolina 27514

Dear Professor Martz:

I enclose for your consideration three copies of a very brief study I have written on José Martí. I confess that I had not originally thought to submit this piece to your distinguished journal, for a number of reasons: its brevity, its rather literary orientation, and, most important, its treatment of a highly sensitive topic which tends to elicit strong emotional responses from adepts of all sectors of the political spectrum.

But after having read your "Editorial Comment" in volume 12, number 1, in which you *imply* that you are *not* beholden to the Panamanian dictatorship, it occurred to me that you perhaps were, as you have said all along, an independent and serious-minded group of scholars, interested in publishing the results of important research *whether or not* those results happened to coincide with the prevailing wisdom on the topic. I also extrapolated somewhat from your inference and reached the conclusion that you also may not be beholden to other pressure groups, which finally convinced me that you should see this piece.

It is probably unwise for me to confess that I have submitted this analysis to some of the standard disciplinary organs, but I feel that it is only fair to advise you that I have been warned by several editors that the study is simply too hot to handle. Thinking again of your aforementioned "Editorial Comment," I perceived that your staff just might be the one remaining group in the country with the courage to publish a piece likely to produce such volatile reactions, and, I should add, perhaps even reprisals. Some of the editorial communications I have received contained scarcely concealed allusions to political pressure as one of the principal criteria for rejection. I am sure you will understand why when you read it. I have not yet been able to ascertain from which side these pressures are being brought to bear, but judging from the nature of these comments, I have been forced to conclude that they are from both. Sides, that is.

I realize that both you and I stand to suffer if this study is ever run, but I feel that the results of my research should no longer be concealed from the academic community, even if that entails some professional and perhaps even physical risk. Since the implications of my work are not only poetic but also historical and political, perhaps even economic, I for one am willing to run that risk. In the event that you are not the professional group I thought, or if one of the sides has in fact gotten to you, I enclose stamps.

Sincerely yours,
(signed)
Jon. S. Vincent
Associate Professor

JSV: cel
Enc.

P.S. I sincerely hope your Russian Wolfhound has a good checkup. Is it, uh, Czarist?

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25 April 1977

Professor Jon S. Vincent
Department of Spanish and Portuguese
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66045

Dear Professor Vincent:

The delay in responding to your letter and manuscript should not be construed as LARR's lackadaisical lassitude—editorially-wise, that is. But you will understand that the intellectual and political challenges it projects have provoked extended debate about the journal's *raison d'être*. In considering the explosive nature of your manuscript, we have been thrown into a veritable tizzy. In my own case, it led to the scheduling of allegedly professional trips during the intervening period to such outposts of the far-flung LARR empire as Tucson, Tuskegee, and yes, even Dallas. Ultimately, however, our responsibility to our readership, to you, and most especially to the long-forgotten Ashtray Man cannot be indefinitely avoided.

A series of late-night staff soirées began with the premise that, as many of my fellow political scientists maintain, numbers will out. That is, a vote of 2-to-1 on the staff was construed as sufficient to legitimize our decision. In the end, dissension and internal conflict became so great, however, that I was forced to take the Lincolnesque path; that is, adopting a highly sophisticated mathematical formula whereby my own vote was weighted in such a fashion as to carry the day (known to aficionados of statistical intricacies as Martz's Theorem of Compensatory Authoritarian Decision-Making).

Having done so, it permitted a means of selecting from among several possible editorial decisions: (a) returning your manuscript without comment; (b) retaining the manuscript in our files, thus permitting the budgetary luxury of using for other purposes the stamps you kindly included with the article; (c) sending it out for multiple evaluations, thus sharing the possible criminality of any editorial decision; (d) blaming a decision on the peer pressure applied by my flaky coworkers (a most attractive if already overworked alternative); or (e) publishing the manuscript in small type and leaving immediately for a research cruise down the Putamayo.

Clearly, I have no choice but that of dramatically cutting the Gordian knot (although your own research leads me to question the possible accuracy of translation from the original Greek—or was it Phrygian—and ask if the heroic figure might have been Alexandra). Thus, this is to propose publication of your article, including as well your accompanying cover letter. If you are agreeable, we will schedule it for publication in volume 13, number 1.

I look forward to hearing from you at your early convenience.

Sincerely,
(signed)
John D. Martz

JDM:rm

JOSÉ MARTÍ: SURREALIST OR SEER?

Jon S. Vincent
University of Kansas

A great deal has been written about José Martí as poet, patriot, and essayist.¹ Much of his life and work has, however, remained almost completely ignored; by some, denied. Relatively little is known about his personal life except that he was Cuban, which for most has been sufficient. But recent research casts fascinating light on his little-known fondness for baccarat, his secret dream of acquiring a Caribbean monopoly of Thom McAn shoe franchises, and his tendency to walk into closed doors. Though all this information is useful and interesting, there has persisted yet another oversight in Martí scholarship, one which has led to an altogether unwarranted and almost totally inaccurate image of him as an inspired but rather inept artist of verse.

The simple fact is that his most famous lines are not his at all. A recent discovery of a yellowed MS² will no doubt bring to an abrupt halt all the impassioned talk one hears these days about “Martí this” and “Martí that.” In the light of this discovery, it is not an exaggeration to assert that the famous lines from *Versos sencillos* are the composition not of the Cuban patriot but of some obscure and probably nearsighted typographer, possibly even a Puerto Rican. The well-known first stanza (by the nearsighted typographer) begins:

Yo soy un hombre sincero
De donde crece la palma

The standard scholarship has held, on the basis of this misprint, that Martí was a sincere but not notably accomplished poet, given to scribbling down the somewhat infantile ditties that went through his head as he traveled about in the tropics. There is even some speculation that he may have been touched by the heat. But a careful look at this opening reveals yet further anomalies. The form “Yo soy” is pleonastic in Spanish, because the first person singular inflection is contained in the verb. Thus, an accurate English rendition of the verse would begin “I I am,” a clumsy beginning for a man of such simplicity and sincerity. Though the extra syllable does function in support of line scansion, it might be hypothesized that Martí may have been a stutterer, if not in speech at least in his (otherwise quite handsome) calligraphy. But the apparently frivolous reduplication may also be first clue to the vanguardist mind lurking behind the innocuous façade of the patriotic ditty-writer.

The double first person obviously functions as reinforcement of the egocentricity at first implied. The careful reader, who searches in any poem for clues to the *voice* of the poet has thus found one doubly loud, one the product of a

huge and perhaps uncontrollable egotism; the voice of a proto-man, a *macho*. The following phrase, *un hombre*, can be rendered simply as “a man,” but the indefinite article in Spanish has particular numerical value, implying that the person speaking (in this case, the *voice*, already identified as a willful and self-centered person) is *one* man (rather than two or three). This is certainly a far cry from the everyman sort of thing found in your average ditty. The final word in the first verse is *sincero*, ordinarily rendered simply as “sincere,” though some scholars have gone to extravagant lengths to make something of the Latin root of the word and concoct some meaning out of the “waxless” quality of the speaker, thereby implying irreconcilable personality conflicts, lack of money, or the loss of an important person or object. Now the problem exacerbates, because the manuscript here makes the single typographical correction that changes the entire poem. The true original reads:

Yo soy un hombre cenicero
De donde crece la palma

Some scholars might reject such a version out of hand, but if the final word is added to what is already known about the poem’s opening, the authentic vanguard character of the verse becomes apparent. *Cenicero*, literally “ashtray,” would thus change the first line into, “I am (the verb *ser*, denoting permanence and immutability, is used over the wishy-washy *estar*, which indicates temporary or fleeting character) an (one rather than two or three) Ashtray Man.” Note that capitals would be called for in English, since this personage is obviously a unique entity with an unusual name and gestalt. In Spanish, the capitals are dispensable, as they often are in book titles and such.

But who is Ashtray Man? The obvious first thought is to connect this being with such fanciful creatures as the Tin Man or Superman, which would not be totally off the mark. It is worth remembering that both these beings had serious allegorical and moral implications, despite their unfortunate reputations as mere entertainers. The real clue is in the next line, *De donde crece la palma*, “From whence grows the palm.” At first glance this may appear not to follow, but if this phrase is joined with what we already know about the *voice* from the first line, a subtle meaning emerges. Most critics have poor-mouthed this line as a clumsy image or even a mixed metaphor, the assumption being, one supposes, that for a palm tree to emerge from a man he must needs be rather waxy. Such a conclusion is not only poetically shallow but botanically fruitless. The only other reading critics have given much attention is the obvious Freudian one, which reduces the voice to that of a priapic Don Juan of the Torrid Zone, lying (presumably) on some tropical strand awaiting a nymph or somesuch to satiate his arboreal engine.

Let us now reconstruct the imagery in light of what we know of Martí and of Cuba and of the first line. First, it is known that Martí was a man of action, concerned with how things went rather than what they looked like. Ashtray Man, which might initially be taken as a visual image, should then be viewed not merely as a surreal vision but as a suggestion of something much more concrete. What was and is a principal money crop in Cuba? Correct, tobacco.

What is the purpose of an ashtray? Correct, to collect ashes. What kind of ashes? Correct, tobacco ashes. Now, for whatever else we may or may not know about Cubans these days, we are certain of the national fondness for and abundance of tobacco. What remains the island's most famous and most sought commodity? Correct, tobacco. Or, more exactly, the cigar, which is the tobacco artifact producing the most ash and thence the largest ashtrays. It is true, of course, that a random survey of Cubans, taken on the island or elsewhere, reveals that many prefer cigars, some cigarettes, some snuff, and some use no tobacco whatsoever. But there is a certain Cuban type known to have a preference for cigars—the man, the *macho*.³ Ashtray Man is thus not just some scatterbrained invention thought up during an attack of heat prostration, but a surreal vision of man taken to the extremes of his potential, like the Rocket Man of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Continuing to the second line, we may now proceed to gather further information about this character. If we assume that Martí's preoccupation in this poem, as in other matters, was political, it might be advanced that the palm tree would be some sort of nationalistic badge to identify the Cubanity of the voice, much as he might have chosen, say, cactus, had he been Mexican. But the palm tree could apply to dozens of other Caribbean, South American, and even African countries. That is, if it is taken in the literal sense of "tree" rather than in what the poet really *says*, "palm." Now, if we return to the first line and muster our clues as to the identity of the voice, we begin to perceive the really extraordinary quality of the poem. The voice is that of a self-assured, egotistical, perhaps even loudmouthed he-man who carries about a large ashtray (or, more likely, has one carried about *for* him). If we can add to this image another feature that could be presumed, we would certainly think first of some sort of facial hair. After all, the poem was written in the nineteenth century, the location is Cuba, and Martí himself was known to have cultivated a rather handsome matched set of moustaches and goatee. This may appear to be an irrelevant clue, given the palm that follows. But Latin men in general are thought of as being rather hirsute (owing largely to their Mediterranean extraction), although this characteristic has been mitigated by admixture with the Amerindian gene pool, which produces an adult male of notably less facial hair. If one were to describe the *type* of natural configuration resulting from this heritage, assuming that little concern was given to the artificial shaping of the resultant foliage, what sort of description might be given? If, for example, a Cuban who had not tended to his toilet for some time were being sought for a crime, what kind of description might be given to the police by an (alleged) victim? An easy parallel can be found in the descriptions that might issue by witnesses attempting to distinguish what sort of antlered animal attacked their camp in the Rockies, though here the geography and phenotype may appear to bear little relation to the problem at hand. A person from Iowa, shown a photograph of an elk, might respond in this circumstance by saying that, yes, the beast looked about like that but its cranial ornamentation was more *palmate* (was, then, a moose). The same description might easily be given of the alleged Cuban assailant, when the (alleged) victim, confronted by a drawing of a bearded Anglo-Saxon type, might say, yes, the person

looked like that but was (perhaps) smaller, darker, and had a more *palmate* (or “scruffier”) supply of facial hair. This without even considering the obvious *visual* and *auditory* comparisons of the palm (frond) *rustling* in the breeze, much as would be said about any (unkempt) beard.

The final conclusion is obvious. Who is Ashtray Man? It might be said to be as plain as the beard on the face. Who, in this century, has become irreversibly identified with the beard, the cigar, and the ego? Who is, to boot, Cuban? The poem is, of course, a prophecy that Cuba’s lamentable serial dictatorships would eventually fall to none other than Fidel Castro.

But what, you may ask, does this do to the poem? Nothing, other than correcting it. The subsequent reading of the rest of *Versos sencillos* is so charged with unsuspected meanings that space prevents a fuller elaboration. The real problem is what this discovery does to the scansion of the first line. Certainly it makes the the singing of the haunting “Guantanamera” more difficult, but that observation itself suggests even more fascinating speculation about Martí’s ability to predict future events and cloak his observations in the most accomplished metaphorical language. How did Martí know about Guantánamo? Certainly he *might* have written about the Bahía de los Cochinos, though a *cochinera* would be an unlikely and unpoetic romantic and political figure, given the porcine connotation. But why not Matanzas or Manzanillo, or even Isla de Pinos? Clearly because Martí *knew*, both in terms of the political probabilities and as an answer to his deepest poetic imperatives, that “La Guantanamera” and Ashtray Man were inextricably bound with his country’s future and his poetic destiny.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Félix Lizaso’s *Martí: místico del deber*, available in English under the title *Martí: Martyr of Cuban Independence*, trans. by Esther Elise Shuler (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1953). Like most of the biographies on Martí, this one, otherwise excellent, devotes altogether too much space to Martí’s birth, his education, his extensive comings and goings, political activities, publications, and ultimately, his death.
2. The manuscript was discovered in a packing crate marked “pomegranates” (*granadas*) found in a large warehouse in the suburbs of Miami, Florida. On the title page are the words *Versos sencillos*, followed by a signature that appears to be that of José Martí, or perhaps “Julio Martín.” There is little doubt about the authenticity of the MS, since it would have been silly for Martí to have signed the document had it been false, and equally mindless for someone else to have signed his name to it, since the fame derived from the work would have gone to Martí (or Martín) at any rate.
3. The obvious Freudian configuration of this particular tobacco product lends further support to the hypothesis.