



LITERATURE AND HUMANISM IN JOSÉ MARTÍ: APPRAISALS FROM THE CURRENT CONTEXT

LITERATURA Y HUMANISMO EN JOSÉ MARTÍ: VALORACIONES DESDE EL CONTEXTO ACTUAL

FELICIA HERNÁNDEZ LORENZO

Centro Universitario Municipal de Güines, Mayabeque, Cuba.

Autor para correspondencia: Felicia Hernández Lorenzo. e-mail: felahdez57@gmail.com

Abstract

This article, through the work of José Martí himself as one of the greatest intellectuals of the 19th century in the Americas, attempts to clarify some of the keys to his humanist vocation. On the basis of Martí's pedagogical, aesthetic, and literary ideals, it reveals his love for the arts in general and the way in which he placed the human being at the center of his entire ideology. The article highlights the Cuban National Hero's consideration about reading, particularly that of good literature, as a contribution to the ethical formation of individuals. It also alludes to his sense of criticism, which he called the exercise of judgment, and how such criticism must be noble and charged with positivity. It points out the fact that many critics today recognize Martí as the true initiator of the Modernist Movement, by virtue of the structural and substantive values, as well as the significance of his poetic work and his artistic-literary essays. Finally, it is pointed out as well how humanism is the central axis of Martí's entire ideology, which is the reason why it has great relevance in a political-economic and socio-cultural context such as the current one, marked by positions against the human race in contrast to those in favor of the values of humanity.

Keywords: Humanism, pedagogical, aesthetic and literary ideals, reading, criticism, political-economic and socio-cultural context

Resumen

Este artículo intenta, a través de la propia creación de José Martí como uno de los más grandes intelectuales del siglo XIX en América, precisar algunas claves de su vocación humanista. Se acude al ideario pedagógico, estético y literario de José Martí para revelar su amor por las artes en general y el modo en que coloca al ser humano en el centro de todo su ideario. Se destaca la consideración del Héroe Nacional cubano acerca de la lectura, en particular de buena literatura, para contribuir a la formación ética de las personas. Asimismo se alude a su sentido de la crítica, denominada por él ejercicio del criterio, y a cómo esa crítica tiene que ser noble y cargada de positividad. Se señala el hecho de que muchos críticos de hoy reconocen en Martí al verdadero iniciador del Movimiento Modernista, en virtud de los valores estructurales y de contenido, además de la vigencia, de su obra poética y de sus ensayos artístico-literarios. Finalmente, se señala también cómo el humanismo es el eje central de todo su ideario, por lo cual este reviste un gran significado en un contexto político-económico y socio-cultural como el actual, signado por posiciones en contra del género humano que contrastan con aquellas en pro de los valores de la humanidad.

Palabras clave: Humanismo, ideario pedagógico, estético y literario, lectura, crítica, contexto político-económico y socio-cultural

Introduction

The extremely turbulent political, economic and socio-cultural context of today's world has turned the international arena into a battleground not only between left-wing tendencies and right-wing - or rather, ultra-right-wing - postulates, but also between an ideology in favor of the human race and another against it; that is, a struggle between humanistic approaches and others that are not.

In his essay *George and Gide*, the writer Edward Morgan Forster (1879-1970) asserted that a humanist possesses four essential characteristics - curiosity, a free mind, confidence in good taste and faith in the human race. This statement, in addition to confirming the affiliation of its author, points to the definition of the possible traits of someone who considers himself a humanist.

Received: January 08, 2025

Accepted: March 14, 2025

Conflict of interests: The author of this work declares no conflict of interest.



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY-NC 4.0). <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Various sources agree in describing humanism as the cultivation or knowledge of human letters; a movement that advocates a return to Greco-Latin culture and is accompanied by the conviction that the classics of that culture contain the highest expression of human values and are, therefore, a means to restore such values; a doctrine or vital attitude based on an integrative conception of human values; an attitude that emphasizes the dignity and worth of the person; consideration, sensitivity and esteem for the human being as the highest value of society, in which talent, feelings and the will to transform reality with their work and themselves are integrated; a set of ideas that express respect for human dignity and concern for the good of men, for their multilateral development, for creating favorable conditions of social life for man. In its most general application, the term humanism can refer to any philosophical or ethical system centered on the concepts of human dignity and freedom.

The life and work of José Julián Martí Pérez, Apostle of Cuban independence and one of the great intellectuals of the 19th century in America, follow humanist paths, revealing today a surprising contemporaneity. In this brief approach to the subject, we will try to clarify, through his own creation, some keys to Martí's humanist vocation.

In his central essay entitled *That Sun of the Moral World*, Cintio Vitier (2003) asserts: "...Martí's entire work, including his literary and artistic criticism, is a historical creation in which ethics and aesthetics merge" (p. 85).

To fully understand this assertion by the essayist, it is essential to go to the pedagogical, aesthetic and literary ideals of José Martí (1853-1895), where his love for the arts in general - including literature, of course - and a deep humanism that led him to place the human being at the center of all this ideals are revealed.

Martí defines literature as: "...expression and form, and reflection in words of the Nature that nourishes and of the spirit that animates the people who create it" (OC, t. 8, p. 336). He understands this form of aesthetic manifestation as a valuable instrument to reveal reality and analyze it; for this reason he says that: "Each social state brings its expression to literature, in such a way that through its various phases the history of the peoples could be told, with more truth than through their chronicles and decades" (1972, p. 156).

Through reading, particularly good literature, people can be ethically shaped; that is why the Master states:

Reading stimulates, ignites, enlivens. One reads great things, and if one is capable of great things, one remains more capable of being great. The noble lion awakens, and from his mane, shaken vigorously, thoughts fall like flakes of gold (1972, pp. 94-95).

To approach life - this is the object of literature: - either to be inspired by it; - or to reform it by knowing

it. (...) making a wish that it tends not to the childish development of jeremiad poetic instincts, (...) but to the formation of characters. (OC, t. 21, p. 227).

It is to this literature that one must go: to the one that expands and reveals, to the one that brings out from the bloody bark the healthy and juicy almond tree (OC, t. 5, p. 469).

The theory of literature formulated by him takes into account other spheres of art such as music and plastic arts, oral and written traditions of universal value, folklore and the most advanced ideas of his time (Hill, 1975).

What he calls the exercise of judgment is very significant: we must remember his works on Whitman, Emerson, Flaubert, Pushkin, Heredia, Casal, and especially on Pérez Bonalde in the prologue to his *Poema del Niágara*, a text that describes the modernist form of expression and explains his own way of assuming it. Before going into the evaluation of the work, Martí carries out an analysis of the historical moment and the social and political context together with its links with art and literature (ILL, 2012).

Today, many theorists recognize Martí, and not Rubén Darío, as the true initiator - even though they tend to call him a precursor - of the Modernist Movement. To understand this recognition, it is enough to compare, for example, Martí's poetic work with any of the books published later by the participants of this trend, in terms of structure, content and validity.

To mention just one example, the poems published in *Versos libres*, from the initial note ("My verses") to those included later in appendices taken from drafts, constitute a paradigm of what Antón Arrufat refers to as spiritual connection; they are verses where the tropology and intertextual winks, in many cases, seem to have been conceived just the day before yesterday.

In them, as in the *Versos Sencillos* and in his articles of artistic-literary criticism, the humanist vocation and performance are palpable. This is shown when he writes:

To criticize is not to bite, nor to sting, nor to nail to the rough pickaxe, it is not to impiously devote oneself to scrutinizing with miserly glances the beautiful work for the spots and stains that disfigure it; it is to point out with noble intent the black mole, and to dispel with a pious hand the shadow that darkens the beautiful work (Valdés, 2002, p. 103).

For the Master, literature is an integrating corpus whose value is intrinsically axiological and therefore formative on the humanist path, implicitly also in the social as well as in human spirituality. For this reason he asks and answers his own question:

Who is the ignorant who maintains that poetry is not indispensable to the people? (...) Poetry, which unites or disintegrates, which strengthens or distresses, which props up or demolishes souls, which gives or takes

away faith and breath from men, is more necessary to the people than industry itself, because the latter provides them with the means of subsistence, while the former gives them the desire and the strength of life (1972, p. 157).

Combining his love for the arts and his philosophy of life, when judging human beings through their generic condition, the Master states: "A sculptor is admirable, because he takes a figure from rough stone: but those men who make peoples are like more than men" (Valdés, 2002, p. 289).

In the aforementioned essay by Cintio Vitier (2003), the author states that Martí's preaching can be summarized in four key points: 1. Continuity and unity of the revolutionary struggle. 2. Anti-racism. 3. Taking sides "with the poor of the earth." 4. Anti-annexationism and anti-imperialism.

Although, for analytical and didactic purposes, the study and identification of Martí's thought - or of his preaching, as Vitier says - has generally been fragmented in this way, we must not forget that the essence of this preaching lies, taking up Jaime García Cuenca's definition, in Martí's concern for human existence consecrated in "man (...) in all the determinations of his being and who aspires to enhance the paths to his full realization", conceiving him in his historicity, in his becoming, in his development, in his plenitude." (García, 2005; pp. 11-12) José Martí is, as he himself expressed in one of his definitions of the concept of education, the repository of all the human work that preceded him, and a summary of the living world not only until the day he lived, but even until the days in which we human beings live today, a stage in which only that respect for the human condition, that essential humanism, can save us from perversity and madness.

As the central axis of all his ideas, it is humanism that gives substance to the life and work of the Master. This centrality is reflected in what Vitier (2003) says about Martí and "the harmony of the universe" in the essay cited above:

Both reason and heart, well combined, allow man the only "real enjoyment," which consists in "making himself," in being "created by himself," but not for himself, but to give himself in service to his neighbors and to the redemption and moral growth of the whole man" (p. 97).

In conclusion, through the examples and comments presented in this article it is revealed that:

- As in the case of the great humanists of the Renaissance, Martí's life and work follow humanist paths. In them we can see the concern to educate humanity on the path of dignity and respect for the existence of human beings, that distinction transmitted - as he himself said - in "groans" by the "human soul" and consecrated in "the majesty of the universal soul."
- For José Martí, literature is an integrating corpus whose value is intrinsically axiological, formative on the humanist path and implicitly also on the social level.

- The validity of his poetics in terms of content, tropology and intertextuality allows us to recognize Martí as the true initiator of the modernist movement.
- As the central axis and cornerstone of his entire ideology, humanism gives body, in its entirety, to the life and work of the Master.

For a full understanding of Martí's legacy, to understand how to put into practice the essential training of today's youth, we must return to that approach of the humanist essence - typified by Martí - of Forster's assertion and the traits of a humanist: curiosity, free mind, confidence in good taste and faith in the human race.

Return to your own Master again and again:

- In search of references regarding curiosity: "...Littlefinger jumping here and there, getting into all the paths and hiding places, seeing everything with his bright squirrel eyes." (The Golden Age, p. 23)
- To find approaches to the free mind:

...the first freedom, the basis of all, is that of the mind: the teacher must not be a mould into which the students pour their intelligence and character, to come out with their little wolves and humps, but an honest guide, who teaches in good faith what there is to see, and explains his pros as well as those of his enemies, so that the character of the student as a man is strengthened, which is the flower that must not dry up in the herbarium of the universities (OC, t. 12, p. 348).
- To have confidence in good taste: "Music is man escaping from himself..." (OC, t. 5, p. 293) "The beauty of style comes from within..." (OC, t. 19, p. 338) "Culture requires a certain rest and cleanliness, just like domestic life" (OC, t. 11, p. 448)
- To understand his unwavering faith in the human race: "I have faith in human improvement, in the future life, in the usefulness of virtue..." (1985, Ismaelillo, vol. 1, p. 17) "Distrust of humanity, the cowards and the miserable!" (OC, vol. 14, p. 392)

In the turbulent political, economic and socio-cultural context of today's world, where there is a heart-rending conflict between humanistic approaches and others that are not, we must return again and again, today and always, to the humanism of the Master.

References

- Cuba. (2012). *Prólogo a El poema del Niágara* (1882). Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística (ILL). Recuperado el 13 de enero de 2022 de <http://www.citmatel.cu>.
- Estados Unidos de América. (2009). Enciclopedia *Encarta*. Microsoft Corporation.

- García, J. (2005). *La comparación en el análisis literario*. Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Pueblo y Educación.
- Hill, H.O. (1975). *El ideario literario y estético de José Martí*. La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Casa de las Américas.
- Martí, J., 1959. *La Edad de Oro*. La Habana, Cuba. Editorial Lex.
- Martí, J., 1972. *Ensayos sobre arte y literatura*. Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba: Ediciones Instituto Cubano del Libro.
- Martí, J., *Obras completas*. La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Nacional de Cuba.
- Martí, J., (1985). *Poesía completa*. Edición crítica. Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Letras Cubanas.
- Valdés, R. (2002). *Diccionario del pensamiento martiano*. Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales.
- Vitier, C. (2003). *Ese sol del mundo moral*. Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba. Ediciones Unión.