

## **UC Merced**

### **TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World**

#### **Title**

Ingrid Robyn. Márgenes del reverso: José Lezama Lima en la encrucijada vanguardista. Almenara, 2020. 350 pp.

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/97h8z437>

#### **Journal**

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 9(8)

#### **ISSN**

2154-1353

#### **Author**

Rodríguez Matos, Jaime

#### **Publication Date**

2022

#### **DOI**

10.5070/T49857570

#### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Ingrid Robyn. *Márgenes del reverso: José Lezama Lima en la encrucijada vanguardista*. Almenara, 2020. 350 pp.

---

JAIME RODRÍGUEZ MATOS  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FRESNO

Ingrid Robyn's *Márgenes del reverso* is a thorough and meticulous monograph that seeks to situate the Cuban poet and thinker José Lezama Lima within the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, paying special attention to the critical dialogue Lezama holds with surrealism. The book consists of four main sections. The first gives us a broad overview of the "contemporary art" (including poetry) as Lezama saw it by establishing the context of the Latin American reception of the vanguards and the way in which the Cuban poet positioned himself within that milieu. Robyn shows to what extent, despite Lezama's fame as not really caring much for the various European vanguards, he was a careful reader of those developments. In the process, what emerges is a style that, according to Robyn, without being dialectical consists of a negation and affirmation and which is encapsulated in the poet's ideas of a "counter-conquest" (117). Robyn extends this notion by claiming that Lezama was not an anti-vanguardist, but a counter-vanguardist (118). The second section tackles the idea of the "marvelous" and the Surrealists within the colonial and insular context in detail. Subsequently, the third section, perhaps the most fascinating of the book, deals with chance operations and indeterminacy. Here Robyn offers a sophisticated reading of the posthumous work *Oppiano Licario* in which Lezama appears to be closest to the surrealist's undercurrent. This closeness is the best place to indicate the specificity of Lezama's difference. Here, chance is underpinned by continuity ("una novela en la que el azar queda conjurado por lo continuo," in Robyn's own words, 249). And this founding continuity, which is always mysterious and hidden, is also the place of the divine, but in a sense that is pointedly not that of the god of the philosophers (208). The fourth and final section tracks the relationship between literature and the plastic arts offering a very illuminating reading of Lezama's first major work, "Muerte de Narciso," from the lens of the light of the collage technique. Altogether, the book consistently and convincingly demonstrates that the heretofore prevalent idea that Lezama was to be understood as something other than a vanguardist is misleading and inaccurate. Instead, the image of Lezama that emerges here is that of a "counter-vanguardist" figure, which is a more accurate and richer conceptualization of his persona that opens the way for further scholarly work. Robyn should be commended for making this possible.

Part cultural history and careful exegesis of Lezama's work, with an exceptionally strong narrative, Robyn's book examines the interactions between disparate aesthetic vanguard projects in Europe and in Latin America. It is a welcomed contribution that will be of interest to anyone concerned with what results when Modernity falls off the margins. For Lezama, and the wider *Origenista* group of intellectuals that gathers around him, one of the most important projects to come out of the Caribbean and Latin America in the twentieth century turns out to be intricately related to the agon with the vanguards and the paradoxes of the tradition of rupture. The key term in Robyn's title, "reverso," stands for the tension between a vanguard that was beginning to lose its edge and whatever could come after it from the Cuban margins through the efforts of Lezama and company. However, Robyn's scholarship shows us that we remain in a difficult position regarding the destiny of the vanguards in Latin America and the Caribbean. Beyond the usual narratives regarding transculturation, the centrality of the Boom, the self-exoticization of the other, and the never-ending but always imperfect affirmations of national identity, what remains to work out today is the strangeness of those cultural artifacts that, despite all the contradictions involved, give rise to a wider and truly global "counter-vanguard" that remains on the cutting edge regarding an encroaching economic and political globalization. It is not simply a question of modernity without modernization that is at stake here. That relation usually involves exposing to what extent aesthetic objects from the margins compensate for a lack of real modernizing structures, particularly within an economic ideology of development and progress. This book demonstrates the extent to which we have yet to clearly see the difficulties at stake. In decrying the residual Hegelianism of modern aesthetics in general, what Lezama and his context show us is not that the other (the Caribbean or "our" Latin America) escapes Hegelianism, but that it has been drowning in Hegelianism even in those concepts that most radically fight for a difference from Europe and Eurocentrism. This is perhaps the hardest aspect of what Robyn deftly illuminates in calling attention to the paradox of an "indecipherable reading" that we must nevertheless unfold as students of Lezama (232). What is at the center of these questions is the precise meaning of the poet's well-known religiosity: in displacing the god of the philosophers for whom there is no room for chance (reason and the directionality of History toward a clear *telos*), Lezama opens a space for a god that would be antithetical to that of religious institutions and stands in as the mysterious and hidden foundation for all the chance occurrences in history. Lezama is one of the most elaborate and accomplished exponents of this thread of modern aesthetics, but he is not alone. One would have to reevaluate the place of occultism, the role of mysticism, and the various substitutions of art for religion, to understand the specificity of Lezama. From César Vallejo to

Gerardo Deniz, there is a long tradition of poets in Latin America for whom God might be severely ill or a little clumsy (and creation the mangled result of this imperfect creature), but not dead. The upshot is that our usual narratives regarding Modernity as a secularizing project do not hold. Modernity, from this purview, becomes the imposition of the god of the philosophers as the only figure available for religiosity (and, from a radically different point of view, politics becomes one of its avatars). Robyn does a magnificent job in showing to what extent these are the issues at the heart of Lezama's engagement with chance and indeterminacy in the critique of surrealism's Hegelianism. Most importantly, Robyn maneuvers through a critique that would turn "indecipherable" had Lezama been read simply as a philosopher. This tack would only produce a second-rate philosophizing autodidact whose access to the primary sources was inadequate at best, when, in fact, the entire oeuvre of the poet goes a long way in putting the very activity of philosophizing in question. That is, Lezama never really did anything other than send up the philosophers of the tradition. If there is anything to be desired of this magnificent contribution to contemporary scholarship on Lezama and the vanguards, it is that it does not foreground these questions clearly enough. However, this is not a criticism; Robyn has done us all a great service in opening the door toward this field of inquiry in relation to Lezama.