

Lorenzo García Vega: Following the Cubist Walls of the Labyrinthian Self

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Sean Manning

The University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

On the opening page of *El oficio de perder*, published in 2004, a title that refers to the *profession of losing* that he considered to be his life as a writer, Lorenzo García Vega states that in order to create this book of memoirs encompassing his seventy-eight years, the task should be like resolving to “entrar por un gran número de puertas, o como soñar que estoy construyendo un Laberinto que tenga una buena cantidad de pasillos” (GARCÍA VEGA, 2005, p. 27). The primary challenge he anticipated was to find a structure capable of retaining his swirling memories; an object comparable to the subject, but liberated from it so as to approach a meaning that had always escaped him otherwise. Though he was born in 1926, and in Jagüey Grande, Cuba, García Vega avowed to have been a child of Cubism, a way of organizing his

surroundings that he said began when he saw José Manuel Acosta's Fernand Léger-esque representation of the *Australia* sugar factory in his hometown. And he demonstrated as much through his lifelong attraction to the movement's concept of a spatial arrangement towards an art of stability and independence.

His family took him from the shelter of his Jagüey Grande to La Habana when he was ten, and with this he received his first shock from the overpowering outside world. Inside the capital he was forced to confront the isolating incomprehension of his new environment. He recalled how "no sólo sentía hasta el ahogo el polvo negro de la ciudad [...] sino que también me parecía como que todo se me escapara" (2005, p. 149). Amidst the turmoil of the Machado and Batista dictatorships, the disillusionment of revolutionaries turned opportunists, the authoritative priests of his Jesuit school demanding his unhesitating faith, and his delicate psychic sensibility that led to his mental suffering and a diagnosis of an obsessive-compulsive disorder, García Vega descended into his impressions of a chaotic mass of unintelligible reality. "Lo peor de una neurosis, es la sensación espantosa de vacuidad, de vivir como alrededor de la verdadera vida, y sin poder penetrar nunca en ella. Esta ha sido, sin duda, la peor constante de mi enfermedad, el sentimiento que nunca dejé de experimentar durante toda mi juventud" (GARCÍA VEGA, 1997, p. 63). With his illness emerged a *dire imaginative need*, using Harold Bloom's words, that set him about finding a path through the darkness, to create meaning from the emptiness that framed his early years. And it was through an undertaking not unlike that of the cubist painters, that he looked for the possibility of concreteness in words. According to Juan Gris, it was "precisamente por reacción contra los elementos fugitivos empleados por los impresionistas en su representación, [que] se tuvo el anhelo de buscar, en los objeto [*sic*] a representar, elementos menos inestables" (GRIS, 1957, p. 90). For García Vega, the word, as he had inherited it, had become untrustworthy in its malleability, and consequently he aspired to its unmasking, to an alchemical residue holding an honesty of image that he could understand.

In this paper, I want to address the theme of capitals and of the avant-garde in Latin America by examining the individual journey of Lorenzo García Vega. Jorge Luis Arcos writes that "hay una identidad

esencial entre la forma que adopta su obra y su sentido” (ARCOS, 2012, p. 298), and as García Vega searches for that meaning, the form follows. Or more precisely, the extent to which he felt he could or could not attain a form, a meaning became possible. Ultimately examining the idea of his proposed memoir-labyrinth, I will first approach two earlier moments in his literary trajectory focusing on each work as a particular attempt at an organizing structure. I will look at how each work by this self-proclaimed “anachronistic avant-gardist” was created by his shifting implementation of the cubist vision he carried along with him: from the plastic qualities of the verses in his first book *Suite para la espera*, published in 1948, to the collage of oneiric texts in *Vilis*, published much later in 1998, and finally returning to *El oficio de perder*, where, despite his initial proposal, he would conclude that he was incapable of harnessing the structure of the labyrinth, instead producing a text that was its opposite, the trace that his life had left within it. Additionally, parallel to his move through these literary trials were his various geographical relocations to multi-functional centers as he searched for a place to live peacefully. From La Habana, to Madrid, New York, Caracas, and finally settling in, and for, Miami, he accumulated unsatisfactory stays and became more sensitive to a perception of their illusoriness as such, that is, as centers that were not. Consequently, when he sat down to attempt a narration of his life, the outcome, were it to be faithful, could only be a textual traverse of a labyrinth whose center was unreachable, the eccentric labyrinth of his own self.

The Cubism of *Suite para la espera* (1948)

In 1993, Lorenzo García Vega recalled the urgency of his pre-literary years prior to meeting Lezama Lima:

Estaba yo metido dentro del gran revolico de los fines de la adolescencia, pero no solo era eso, sino que estaba fuertemente agarrado por un tremendo desajuste psíquico para el cual el primer analista que consulté me recomendó unas sesiones de electro shock, sesiones que no dí, aunque estuve alrededor, o rozando una esquizofrenia. Esto fue, entonces, la condición que precedió al encuentro con el Maestro. (GARCÍA VEGA, 1993, p. 12)

ciclón

Apollinaire al agua

(GARCÍA VEGA, 1948, p. 58)

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Free of rhyme, but still highly sonorous, the suppression of punctuation, and the single and double-indentations of one-word verses make the poem reminiscent of an early avant-garde preoccupation with structure. Significantly, it is dominated by a lexical field of shapes in motion, including the spiraling corkscrew and cyclone, the receiving octahedron, and the zigzagging swings. Also present is a bust of Bach, a synesthetic translation of music, of Baroque counterpoint, and an individual's life, into sculpture. The reader explores a strange scene without context, through an impersonal tone that rejects the suggestion of the poet's presence as witness, thus liberating it from an *a priori* reality. Just as with Cubism, the person and their anecdotes were to be excluded, and it is only with García Vega's later assertions and our critical hindsight that we can personalize it, considering it an object from an early poetic passageway inside his labyrinth.

Lezama Lima wrote of his disciple's first production, "Se percibe un alejamiento de la fluencia surrealista, y una búsqueda de planos cubistas: la estructura y la lejanía de cada palabra hierven su poliedro" (LEZAMA LIMA, 1948, p. 43). It is clear that the peculiar anachronicity of García Vega's avant-garde, favoring Cubism over the more recent Surrealism, was in part an act of freedom professing no allegiance to any manifesto. For this child of Cubism, his inheritance was not a passive birthright —this was certainly not the aesthetic of Lezama Lima— but rather a deliberate election whose intent was to find an expression in agreement with his psychic need towards a potentially healing order. Now, through literature, he could create an independent art object, that, as T.S. Eliot described, could serve him not as "the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (ELIOT, 1950, p. 10), both in the sense of an entry into a strain of cultural tradition (finally penetrating the life that overwhelmed him before meeting Lezama), and as a manner of a psychoanalytical self-examination, or self-extraction, and treatment.

Expanding the Concrete

Despite the stability of those superimposing planes in García Vega's *Suite*, a level of sensations escaped his structuring. This level corresponded to his obsession with another significant work from his apprenticeship: Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Somewhere along the way, he was certain that he had "mezclado un poema cubista de Pierre Reverdy con el sabor de un quimbombó hecho por Mamá" (GARCÍA VEGA, 2005, p. 337). Whatever he had succeeded in ordering through the poems of *Suite*, his reality now included the memory of his experience composing it, of being a fearful young man in his early twenties shut up inside his mother's house, where he "tampoco podía dar un paso en el mundo exterior" (GARCÍA VEGA, 2005, p. 353), reading obsessively amongst the smells and tastes of her food. Within the object of each word, laid next to and on top of another inside the poem, where were the sensations of smell, taste, and memory? It would seem that he needed the fragments to be larger, so that they could capture more, and he moved away from verse, towards prose.

It is important to note that the young poet who had left the Belén Jesuit School at 14 after declaring that he did not believe in God, was part of the primarily Catholic *Orígenes* group. While his love and gratitude for Lezama was clear, he did not feel he belonged. And esthetically, his attraction to Cubism, was in discord with the staunch cultural mission of the group. We recall that Reverdy's abandonment of cubist poetry coincided with his conversion to Catholicism. The overwhelming personality of Lezama resulted in a ceremonial group with the great poet at the center. "En la década del cincuenta yo estaba inserto en la órbita del grupo Orígenes; todas mis reacciones estaban dentro de esa órbita," he stated in an interview with Carlos A. Aguilera in 2002 (AGUILERA, 2002, p. 60). The initial freedom he was provided through *Orígenes* and the expression he had learned, whereby his sensation of emptiness became a temporal opportunity for action, was stifled by the weight and solemnity of the group's transcendent vision, and despite having published several books, he had not managed to find a more satisfying coexistence with the world. And it was not better for him after the Revolution.

In 1968, realizing he could go nowhere in Castro's Cuba, Lorenzo García Vega left for Madrid. In an interview he recounted an ex-

change he had with Lezama prior to that in which he doubted himself for not ever having travelled out of the country. Lezama responded, “pero tuviste como maestro a la principal figura de la literatura cubana. Ni te quejes de eso no te hacía falta haber ido a ninguna parte. La principal figura de la literatura española e hispanoamericana soy yo, y yo fui tu maestro. Así que tuviste completa la cosa” (AGUILERA, 2002, p. 59). There is the insinuation of a totality through Lezama Lima and La Habana at its center, but García Vega was still ill and distanced himself from the orbit of both—though he later confessed that he was not “apto para salir de Cuba” (ESPINOSA, 2001, p. 22)—marking the start of his geographical errantry towards a place suited for him, a place, however, that he would not find.

The Oneiric Collages of *Vilis* (1998)

After the trauma of his first move to La Habana at 10, now, at 42, he entered anew into the confusion of an unknown city, and again two years later into New York, where he was further isolated, linguistically. Unable to afford a psychoanalyst, he consulted scotch instead. From the time he left Cuba until the end of his seven years in New York, he published only one work, *Ritmos acribillados*, and this he had written when he was still in Cuba. In August 1976, Lezama died and García Vega lost the pull of his Maestro’s orbit. Coupled with a move to Caracas where he published his poetic diary *Rostros del Reverso* in 1977, and the polemical essay *Los años de Orígenes* in 1979 in which he bitterly scrutinized his experience of the increasingly mythicized and re-appropriated *Orígenes* group, he entered into a second era of freedom in his literary career.

Amidst this continued destabilization of the defining elements of his life; his pursuit of the reverse of things, of the un-masquerading idea, García Vega’s Cubism, fifty years after his *Suite*’s analytically constructed poems of noun-images charged with their own depth of content, moved towards the synthetic constructions in his works *Collages de un notario* (1993) and *Vilis* (1998). In both we find an evident redefining of what it meant to him to be Cubist. The title of the first work evokes the collage, but it is being used by the notary (a moniker he would adopt for himself in place of *writer*), in other words, a collage of one who gives their testimony of certain witnessed

events, a collage of anecdotes, a collage as an art object reunited with the reality of the artist. His second work, *Vilis*, is also a collage, but of dreams he recorded in his bedside notebook and then situated in the fictitious location of the book's title. These fragments of text are, according to García Vega, "casi todo material en estado puro. Un material al que le di una forma: una estructura: una ciudad imposible donde hay determinados barrios. Lo mismo se pasa de un barrio de Madrid que a otro barrio de otra ciudad, o a otro" (AGUILERA, 2002, p. 52). The multi-centered construction of his first verses, aligned with his first readings of literary Cubism, is still evident here, but now each object reaches a scale of greater personal exposition strictly linked to his own experiences as he dreamed them.

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María Zambrano, who had remarked in 1948 on the distinctive happiness she detected in García Vega's *Suite para la espera*, proposes in her work *El sueño creador* (1965) an approach to the dream as a whole form, not as a collection of content to be interpreted.

Ante la totalidad, en el sueño simbólicamente, en la vigilia en virtud de ciertos "suspensos" que en el vivir intervienen, el ser humano se siente y aun se ve como ante una montaña inaccesible o como ante un desierto sin límites, o ante una extensión inerte. Imágenes que revelan al sujeto una situación liminar en que el vivir se ha escindido, y queda, de un lado, el sujeto a solas, y de otro, la totalidad de la vida como algo a recorrer o a escalar imposiblemente. (ZAMBRANO, 1965, p. 76)

Here we have a striking summary of García Vega's psychological struggle. The "suspensions" in living were the moments of neurotic crisis when he felt to the side of reality, a spectator unable to enter into it. By taking possession of his dreams (another insurmountable whole where one is a spectator) and assembling them into his own creation he seems to usurp inaccessibility both in the dream and in waking with the activity of literary expression. Taken as an indistinguishable melding of conscious and unconscious life, independent in its own right, when organized on the pages of *Vilis* they present an intermediate reality that both lacks context for their bizarre, nonsensical content, and is nothing but context as they have been identified as the dreams of the author.

He preserves the collage of the Cubists, but he also found inspiration in the Japanese literary form of *zuihitsu*, random texts collected

as if in diary form. He inserted among the transcriptions of dreams small texts labeled *the diary of a builder of small boxes*. This too suggests the intermediate position between the concrete and the subject, that is, between his two needs: understanding himself and structuring that understanding.

Sigo trabajando con los olores. Sigo tratando de convertirlos en materiales plásticos que sirvan, después, para meterlos dentro de las cajitas. Olores que se entrelazan. [...] Tendré que tener mucho cuidado, pues la tarea es muy difícil. Tendré que pasar de un olor a otro, como se pasa por los escalones de un cuento. (GARCÍA VEGA, 1951, p. 12)

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His desire is to place the insubstantial into the substantial. For Zambrano in our dreams we are prisoners unable to intervene inside a continuous flow of time occupied despite us. Upon waking, time ebbs allowing us the possibility of activity. By taking his dreams, those small prisons, and assembling them together with intercalary diary excerpts describing the struggle to achieve the appropriate object, he seems to suggest through fragmentation an escape from that insurmountable existential whole through the act of writing.

The Aesthetic of the Traverse in *El oficio de perder* (2004)

Reaching again *El oficio de perder*, as a book of memoirs that must therefore dialogue with time, we remember García Vega's original proposal for it as the dreaming of the construction of a space, of a labyrinth. To evaluate his developed use here of Cubism's structuration as it had travelled with him from *Suite para la espera*, I would like to consider this work based on an aesthetic of the traverse, the sum of several movements rendered parallel by this text: The chronological movement through a life, the movement through the spiraling memory attempting to move chronologically through a life, the movement of a narration searching for an intelligible negotiation between the two, and the movement of the text through and down the pages.

Before this, however, it is revealing to look briefly, as point of comparison, at his 1952, *Espirales del cuje*, which also presents an early memoir text of his childhood.

Sí, era muy hermoso y conmovedor cuando mi madre hablaba de Casimbalta. Y los días que venía a vacunar el médico Vera y

como [sic] ella y sus hermanas huían hasta el arco-iris allá por el potrerillo de Pancho Vueltaabajo. **Sí**, y habían [sic] los días de bailes y mi abuela estaba frenética y había llegado mamá Pina. **Sí**, y nadie quería ir en la grupa del más feo... Y era cosa de reírse, pero de reírse a no acabar-“tanto que tu abuela nos pellizcaba-cuando se veían los primeros faroles del guateque. **Sí**, era tanta la risa cuando salían los Suárez y le decían al abuelo: -Pero pasen, pero si es el compadre Pablo, pero pasen. (GARCÍA VEGA, 1951, p. 31)

In this passage the textual fragments are easily detected, separated by the cementing *sí*. But these *yeses* are not responding to any explicit question posed earlier or later in the novel, and they are not limited to the four in this section. The word “yes” used to interrupt and unify sentences occurs 219 times (forgive me, Lorenzo, for counting). So while the pieces of this particular childhood memory could have been allowed to continue forward unbroken, an exterior voice interjects, separating planes of narration and confirming its own recollection. Such self-assuredness is uncharacteristic of García Vega’s expression post-*Los años de Orígenes*, and not surprisingly, when he revisited it he cringingly identified it as part of the *Orígenes* transcendent form that he had later rejected, though he nevertheless found acceptable a “cierta visión cubista del campo cubano” (AGUILERA, 2002, p. 54). In *Espirales*, the tone of the creator’s confidence in his creation and a faith in the object constructed of the memory underlies the written word. These memoirs advance without hesitation as if he were in possession of a special knowledge of the structure through which he was maneuvering, as if he held the map in his hands, or as if he himself had built it.

Now, looking at a passage from *El oficio de perder*, written over 50 years later, we hear an entirely different governing tone.

No sé cómo, cuando me sobreviene un tiempito de angustia como ahora me ha sucedido, no se me llega a disolver todo lo que he escrito. Pero, por suerte, no me sucede así. Había antes, cuando uno era niño, un papel sobre un cartón. Uno escribía en el papel. Después uno levantaba la página, y todo quedaba borrado, listo para volver a escribir sobre ella. Pues bien, ahora es como si escribiendo sobre el kaleidoscopio [sic], la angustia me hubiese levantado la página, pero sin que nada se haya borrado. Puedo seguir. Menos mal. La angustia me levanta la página, y todo permanece ahí. ¿Cómo? Será, me digo, que tengo un kaleidoscopio [sic], donde aunque los cristalitos se muevan, las protoimágenes [sic] permanecen. ¿Será así?

Pero ¿cómo se podrá leer todo esto que estoy escribiendo? Pues aunque, hablando de este kaleidoscopio [*sic*] trato de ser lo más descriptivo posible, sé que debe haber muchos puntos que quedan confusos. (GARCÍA VEGA, 2002, p. 122)

As this text appears amid fragments of his memories of a dining room in Jagüey Grande after watching a Laurel and Hardy film at the Cinema Regina, and of a quotation from Pessoa whose content he makes use of to continue writing, it could be considered the textual counterpoint to the “yes” in *Espirales*. As a counterpoint, however, it is not a “no”; it is not a negation of the memories or of the resulting form, but instead it is a moment of doubt, it is uncertainty instead of certainty, where the creator questions the intelligibility of the object that he is assigning to his memory. Has he wandered too far in the place where his reality of superimposed images defies the possibilities of the written word? “Lo sé, sé toda la confusión en que estoy metido,” he writes, “pero no la puedo evitar. No puedo evitar unas memorias que quizás casi no sean memorias, no puedo evitar un Laberinto que casi no sé soñar del todo, pero a lo mejor esto tenga que ser así” (GARCÍA VEGA, 2005, p. 116). And his hesitations solidify, as an adhesive, the very movement within the composing of the work.

When he doubts, transcribing his questions into the text—“but can I really say what I’m saying?” he often asks—he seems to digress, a parenthesis as he sometimes calls them, only to look through another particle of that kaleidoscope overlying the several parallel paths he is attempting to consolidate. During these pauses when he fears that he has made a wrong turn, that he has reached a dead end, that he does not know how to finish, that he will not be able to finish, he seems not to be constructing a labyrinth, but to be lost inside of it. And lost, he repeats himself, and he acknowledges that he is repeating himself, an act of retracing his steps like the boy in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* walking carefully backwards over his footprints in the snow-covered maze. But García Vega is never certain as to exactly where he is. He doesn’t know how to find the entry or the exit. He does not possess the essential knowledge of the structure in order to be able to construct it. All he can do is continue walking. “Pero si no hay fin entonces ese camino es exactamente un laberinto,” writes Jorge Luis Arcos (2012, p. 298). Yes, but this is only metonymically correct. The labyrinth is not the path; it is what shapes the path. What García Vega creates instead

is the tangible form of the experience of the space inside the larger structure that is beyond his comprehension.

If we recall as a starting point the emptiness he suffered in his youth and the obsessive need to establish order within it, we can see how García Vega's initial confidence as a Cubist constructor of artistic objects and independent realities to fill that void, has travelled through various centers including the transcription of dreams as an unlocking form, to accommodate more fully his own suspicion of the object itself, creating instead its reverse, his imprint upon the object. The shape of emptiness, the empty shape, corresponds to the trace, in Derridean terms, yes, but more appropriately in paleontological terms of the fossil of an animal's behavior upon a substrate, as with burrowing, crawling, or walking. The imprint that creates a structure of vacancy inside a sandstone or a limestone indicating that something journeyed through it unaware of the massiveness of the world about it. Here the autonomy of the artifact is also underlined since the fossil is not the animal itself, only a physical record of its activity in space.

Conclusion

On the closing page of *El oficio de perder*, García Vega considered to what extent he had accomplished his initial proposal: "Sólo he tomado conciencia de puntos, de soplos que deben estar relacionados, pero lo que todavía no he encontrado, ni creo que lo encontraré ya nunca, es el hilo que me pudiera conducir, con toda seguridad, de un punto a otro punto, o de un centro a otro centro, de mi Laberinto" (GARCÍA VEGA, 2005, p. 558). "No tengo hilo," he continues later, "y, por lo tanto, no conozco nada del Laberinto" (Ibidem, p. 559). Lorenzo García Vega, in his need to shape the intangible chaos that overwhelmed him psychically, discovered literature and through the Cubist ideas of stability in the image attempted to construct a space of meaning by way of the poetic word. "Cubista siempre he sido," Arcos, "Me he acostumbrado a ser un apátrida" (ARCOS, 2008, p. 559), he said in 2008, but throughout his life he journeyed through his own experiments with Cubism: in *Suite para la espera* as Daedalus, the master architect, in *Vilis*, as Theseus exploring the Labyrinth in possession of a thread to allow for his escape, and finally in *El oficio de perder*, as a prisoner left to the Minotaur, a writer with a profession

for losing.

García Vega's ultimate Cubism abandons the object itself for the experience of the act of structuring towards an object that would be his center, if he could ever reach it. He also resists the easy escape; an identification of his experience with any collective that could link him back to the universal, that could pull him out of the labyrinth and ease his doubts inside a universal truth allowing him to embrace one of those capitals in Paris, in New York, or La Habana. Instead, his last lines read: "Así que irme quedando solo. Aprender a que estoy solo. Escribir sabiendo que estoy solo. Escribir solo. Y, sobre todo, saber que escribo solo" (GARCÍA VEGA, 2005, p. 559).

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