

# DAURA OLEMA GARCÍA'S *MAESTRA VOLUNTARIA* AND THE MAKING OF A REVOLUTIONARY IDENTITY IN POST-1959 CUBA

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In "Socialism and Man in Cuba" Che Guevara gives the rationale for education in revolutionary Cuba. He insists on the need to develop a revolutionary consciousness, a new mind-frame which will support the new society and supplant the ideological foundations of capitalism which were prevalent in pre-revolutionary Cuba. Che is reasoning within the Marxist tradition, according to which a new superstructure needs to be elaborated to support the base of a new society. Guevara encourages Cubans to develop this ideological foundation solidly, and the only way to achieve that goal seems to be to turn "society as a whole... into a gigantic school" ("Socialism" 6).

The Literacy Campaign, launched at the beginning of the Cuban Revolution, illustrates Che Guevara's concept of the usefulness of education for the building of a revolutionary regime. In the course of one year, 1961, no less than 700,000 Cubans were taught to read and write, but the import of this campaign actually goes further than the teaching of literacy. As Tzvi Medin puts it, "illiterates were taught not just a language, but the language of the Revolution" (69). The volunteer teachers were meant to offer a model of revolutionary zeal to the students, and the primers of the Literacy Campaign consisted of readings which explained the ideological principles of the Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Overall, the Literacy Campaign was an essential means to accomplish the total education of the masses in the revolutionary dogma, once the learners' first mental associations of sounds and letters inevitably led to revolutionary concepts.

This paper is part of a larger project on the constitution of the identity of the revolutionary in the first decade of the Cuban Revolution. My focus in this paper is the study of the Literacy Campaign as an attempt to spread an ideology that was destined to constitute the new identity. My analysis is centered on Daura Olema García's *Maestra voluntaria*, which not only represents the Literacy Campaign and its manifold motives, but most importantly it reproduces in its narrative the pedagogic purpose of the Campaign.

In my reading of *Maestra voluntaria* I rely on two concepts--introduced by Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses--which contribute to the analysis of the constitution of identity in the novel. First, Althusser's concept of ideology as "a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," and his claim that identity is constituted through ideology (Althusser 153, 160).<sup>2</sup> *Maestra voluntaria*, as a literary text, is the appropriate vehicle for social

representations that constitute the identity of the reader, especially at a time when the State is promoting a kind of literature that is committed to the spreading of an ideology, as was the case with the beginning years of the Revolution.

Secondly, Althusser's notion of the constitution of identity relates to a process of identification with the representations of a given ideology. In Althusser's theory, identification consists of two steps, recognition and interpellation. Thus, there is enough degree of familiarity in an ideological text that the reader can acknowledge the 'obviousness' or the 'naturalness' of the statements it makes: this makes it possible for the individual to identify himself/herself with what is stated in the text. Interpellation has to do with the fact the individual is confronted with a "hailing" or a "calling" in the text: no matter how the representation asks the individual to become what he/she is *not*, the individual will be enticed to identify with it and recognize himself or herself in the representation of the text.

In this paper I assume that the revolutionary ideology and the representation of the identity of the revolutionary in *Maestra voluntaria* serve to construct the identity of the reader: he or she can recognize him/herself in it through the high degree of familiarity that the representation offers, but at the same that representation interpellates him or her to transform their identity into the new identity, that of the revolutionary. I will focus on the character of Vilma, who herself experiences an identity transformation, and how the text provokes an identification of the reader with the character in a way that the reader undergoes the same identity transformation.

The novel *Maestra voluntaria* starts and ends in the same place: a "third class" train car. The time of the narration is thus circular, but the protagonist that goes in the train at the end of the novel has undergone a radical change of identity. The trip to the Sierra, the details of the long journey, arrival and adaptation to the Camp of Literacy Instructors, is presented as a journey to the center of the self which brings Vilma --the protagonist--to "define" herself and turn her identity into that of a revolutionary.

As the novel opens, Vilma's first person narration places the reader in a context which is full of references to various mythological sites of Cuban revolutionary history. Vilma is in a crowded train bound to Oriente, traditionally the most revolutionary region in Cuba. As stated by the narrator, the passengers are headed for a training Camp for volunteer teachers in Minas del Frío, the location of the first contingent of students who were sent to the countryside to teach literacy. On her way to Minas del Frío, Vilma passes by Yara, where the famous revolt of "el grito de Yara" was initiated (1868); Yara is a key symbol of rebellion, for it was there that the first important Cuban

revolt against Spain took place. Once the Cuban Revolution triumphed, however, the whole Oriente region was redefined as one of the most faithful to the Revolution, and the first contingent of the Literacy Campaign was to make sure that there would be no exception to that rule. Minas del Frío is in Sierra Maestra, the scene of the guerrilla struggle: thus, Sierra *Maestra* honors its name, when the mountains which once formed revolutionaries are the site of instruction of illiterates as well as the place where skeptics like Vilma finally embrace the Revolution.

True revolutionaries, as described in the book, are always such: they only have to *realize* their revolutionary self. "Understanding" or "becoming clear" is the process of coming toward such a realization. The narrative of *Maestra* focuses on the process of Vilma's *understanding*, which brings a change of identity in her and presumably that of the reader. The voice of the narrator is a first person situated in the present, events being cotemporaneous with the narration. In reading this novel the reader easily identifies with the character, for the first person narration in the present not only gives immediacy to the character's cogitations, but it may make the actual reading become a sort of recitation.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Vilma voices complaints and ideological qualms that any reader who may have experienced volunteer work in the Revolution can relate to: Vilma's character confronts the reader with a familiarity that he/she can identify with.

Vilma gets to *understand* through exposure to a series of physical and ideological elements which are alien to her. At the beginning of the novel Vilma's interior monologue focuses on the suffering of her body through circumstances that one may call physical trials, such as a long, uncomfortable trip. Her constant complaints reveal a self-centered bourgeois personality --by revolutionary standards-- which will change as the novel progresses. It is also in the journey toward Minas del Frío that Vilma is exposed to her first ideological trials. The people with whom she travels represent a series of attitudes and political convictions that Vilma has come to abhor. The implicit value judgement in the text emerges when her deprecating comments are juxtaposed to representations of virtuous revolutionaries, as in:

Aquel muchacho moreno de la camisa roja y mochila y boina del mismo color, es repugnante. ¿Será socialista?

Reconozco que voy algo dispuesta a no creer, a no aceptar. La muchacha que viaja a mi derecha va optimista mirando el paisaje y de tanto en tanto me habla de su pobreza, del sacrificio de la madre para pagarle el colegio, etc (8 emphasis mine).<sup>4</sup>

As in the passage above, Vilma's disgust toward the appearance of certain people is attached to a given political idea. Her most rejected notion is that of "socialism": Vilma embodies the distrust that many people of the Cuban middle class had on the idea of Socialism. Written in 1962, when the Cuban Revolution had just been proclaimed "Marxist-Leninist," the novel is designed to dispel the suspicions that such a concept had aroused in the Cuban people. By having Vilma voice many of those suspicions and eventually adhere to the Revolution with all its consequences, the author offers a model for the skeptical reader.

The style of the first part of the book, Vilma's journey to Sierra Maestra, is of the kind characterized by Mikhail Bakhtin as "hidden polemic." Hidden polemic is not monologic, as a totalizing discourse expressing only *one* opinion might be, but dialogic, in that it integrates at least two voices. In this integration the voice of the author's point of view is given prominence, however, while the voice of the Other is antagonized. In Bakhtin's own words:

In a hidden polemic the author's discourse is directed toward its own referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time every statement about the object is constructed in such a way that, apart from its referential meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the other's discourse on the same theme, at the other's statement about the same object (Bakhtin *Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics* 107).

In the case of Vilma, the first person narrator poses as the voice of the other (the skeptical, the non-revolutionary) at the beginning of the novel. In her interior monologues, the I of *Maestra voluntario* is implicitly antagonizing itself: the narratorial voice presents information to the reader in a slanted way, by juxtaposing ideological stances strategically, in a manner that gives more legitimacy to revolutionary beliefs. This narrative technique reveals an overlapping between the narrator's and the author's design: to persuade the reader to transform his or her identity. In her interior monologues Vilma voices the position critical of the Revolution, so that an average reader may identify with it. As the reading unfolds, however, Vilma's critical attitude diminishes and gives way to that of an increasingly convinced revolutionary.

The journey toward the Sierra represents the time of major exposure and identity transformation for Vilma. Vilma's total conversion is very gradual: as she gets to the Camp, her interior monologues and first person narration give way to a second person narration ("nosotros") thus indicating that she is more integrated in the group and more accepting of the collective spirit of the

Revolution. Owing to limitations of space I will now focus on the culmination of this conversion which coincides --not surprisingly-- with the ascension to the Turquino peak.

El Turquino is the highest mountain peak in Sierra Maestra, and according to the legend it served as the guerrilla headquarters. The teacher training camps used to end with ritual ascents to the peak, often up to three times. Vilma emerges "victorious" after the three ascensions, for not only has she endured exhaustion but also the excruciating pain of a twisted ankle. The strenuous walk is repeatedly presented in the text as an allegory for revolutionary effort, besides literally being the proof of their endurance:

El camino es largo, muy largo. La pendiente es difícil de escalar. No quieran apresurarse demasiado. Lo importante es llegar. En los trechos más pendientes encontrarán raíces de las cuales pueden sujetarse para subir con más seguridad. Al hacerlo deben fijarse primero si la raíz está firme, tan firme que sostenga el peso del cuerpo... El Turquino es nuestra misión porque nuestra revolución socialista necesita de nosotros. Porque de nosotros, de nuestra resistencia y de nuestra moral depende el futuro de nuestro país (122).<sup>5</sup>

These words recall Che Guevara's, in "Socialism and Man in Cuba", where cautions about time and amount of effort needed in the Revolution are reiterated, while at the same time there is the certainty that the future depends on the revolutionaries:

La revolución se hace a través del hombre, pero el hombre tiene que forjar día a día su espíritu revolucionario. Así vamos marchando.... El camino es largo y desconocido en parte; conocemos nuestras limitaciones. Haremos el hombre del siglo XXI: nosotros mismos (Guevara 70-71).<sup>6</sup>

In the novel's passage, the road of the Revolution is also long and arduous, and --as in Che's speech-- the climbers are warned that they should not go too fast; they can hold on to certain roots that may help them on the way, but they have to make sure that these roots are strong, i.e revolutionaries should not hold on to ideological traps. The success of the Revolution relies on their endurance, a military principle based on the notion of existence as struggle. Their climbing the Turquino is a test of those capacities: thus, once they reach the peak, they shout "¡Vencimos el Turquino!" (134).

The passage serves as a metaphor for Vilma's transformation of identity. Her progressive disembodiment serves to illustrate her focus on the revolutionary ethics of sacrifice and commitment to ideals. Vilma's conversion, from an identity that a skeptical reader could identify with, to a true revolutionary, serves to interpellate the reader and persuade him or her to adopt the revolutionary identity. After Vilma climbs the Turquino, the ideological and physical obstacles for assuming a new identity have been removed. The novel orchestrates a change of identity in the reader, not only by posing Vilma as a model, but also by providing images of Cuban nature as intrinsically revolutionary as well as appealing to the reader's need to belong to the revolutionary nation. In an extended version of this paper I show the multiple devices used to fulfil the intent of the Literacy Campaign: to teach the Cuban people to become true revolutionaries.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For instance, according to Medin, these were the titles of some of the readings in the primer: "The Agrarian Reform Cooperative," "Every Cuban Owner of His Home," "The Militias," "Cuba Is not Alone." In addition, the last test consisted of the dictation of a paragraph that synthesized the objectives of the revolutionary government, and once the test was passed the student was required to write a letter to Fidel Castro (Medin 71).

<sup>2</sup> I prefer the term "identity" over Althusser's "subjectivity" because it describes more accurately the fact that an ideology constructs in us something which is additional to what we would call a basic subjectivity. As we will see below, according to Althusser's theory, when a reader receives an ideological text, his or her subjectivity is already formed, but he or she can be persuaded to take a given "subject position": I call this position --which can be multi-faceted-- an "identity."

<sup>3</sup> By "recitation" I mean that, by reading a narration in the first person, one is enacting the "I" as one's own voice, which makes the process of identification more likely to take place. Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, written in the first person and meant to be a form of *prayer*, is an example of a kind of text that is aimed at provoking an identification between the reader and the protagonist of the autobiography, in order to persuade the reader to

take St Augustine's life as an example and undergo the same conversion that he experiences.

<sup>4</sup> "That black young man with the red shirt and the matching backpack and beret, he is disgusting. *Will he be socialist?*"

I must confess I am somehow ready to not believe, to not accept. The young woman who sits on my right is looking at the landscape optimistically, and from time to time she talks to me about her poverty, the sacrifice her mother had to do to pay for her school, etc" (translation and emphasis mine).

<sup>5</sup> "The path is long, very long. The hill is difficult to climb. Don't you try to rush too much. The important thing is to get there. In the steepest stretches you will find roots you will be able to hold on to, in order to climb more safely.

When you do that, you must check that the root is firmly attached, so firmly that it will support the weight of the body.... The Turquino is our mission because our socialist revolution needs us, because the future of our country depends on us, on our resistance and our morale" (translation mine).

<sup>6</sup> "The revolution is made through man, but man must forge his revolutionary spirit day by day. Thus we march on.... The road is long and in part unknown. We know our limitations. We will create the man of the twenty-first century --we, ourselves" (Translation Pathfinder edition, 16-17).

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