

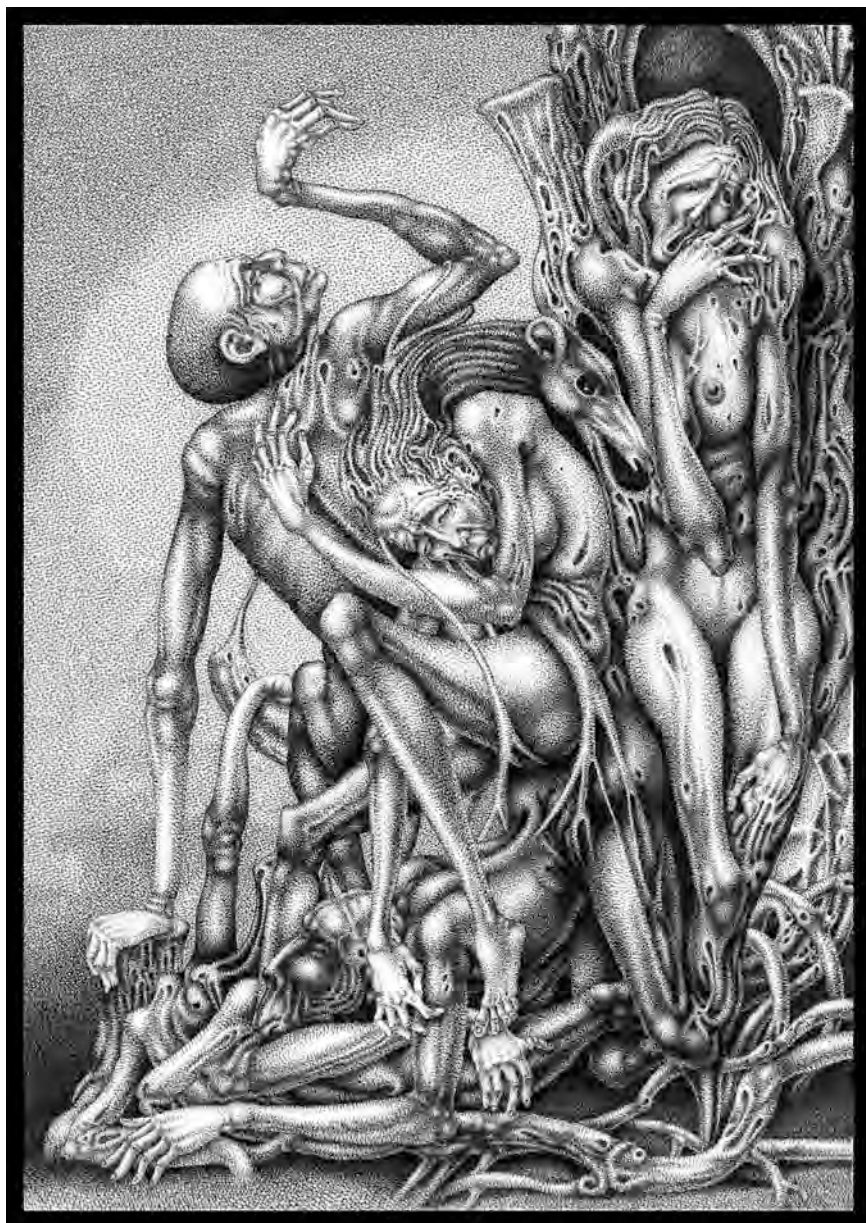
Gint Aras

A Dialogue on José Lezama Lima

A few weeks after my graduation from college—a five-year path of squalor, poverty and bad jobs in kitchens and hotels—I attended a party at a professor’s home. Dr. Paulo Fischer of Argentina was a star of the Comparative Literature department, translator of over 100 works from Spanish to English, a Pulitzer prize winner and MacArthur fellow. He was an authority on Cervantes, a lover of Baroque art and architecture, and an unlikely but fierce champion of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Fischer lived in the “Caddillac of Colletown,” a neighborhood of wide lawns and ancient trees where only professors, physicians and occasional restaurateurs owned homes. None of the dozen invited students—a supposed *crème de la crème*—had ever been to this neighborhood. I didn’t even know it existed, and only three blocks from my roach-infested room. Fischer’s tall foyer and leather sofas seemed to promise us chosen students, contrary to the warnings of our parents and friends, that the study of Literature did not lead to the gutter.

The student-teacher party teetered someplace between bad and tolerable. Fischer had bottles of Chilean and Argentinean wine, and Claudia, his petite, *soigné* wife produced attractive cutting boards of cured meats and robust cheeses, prunes and dried figs, sliced apples and mangoes. Conversations went on about one student’s Fulbright and some guy’s class in Veracruz. A girl told of her acceptance to Cambridge, but whined over rejection from the Sorbonne. I avoided puking only by listening to Claudia’s stories about her village in Bolivia; her dad and older brother had managed to support a family of six by picking coffee. She said, “Paulo mentioned you drive a hearse to pay your rent. Is this true?” I had been fired from the job for falling asleep behind the wheel and driving into a ditch. So I told her I was unemployed.

During dinner, Fischer drank a bottle of Carménère by himself. Once Claudia served the dessert, little pyramids of berries covered in caramel cream, he started telling stories of his “wild” days. He had passed a



course in Modern Literature without ever reading *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Lolita* or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Obviously drunk now and fondling the nipple-tip of his pinky, he asked us to go around the table and admit what books we had skipped during our studies. One guy mentioned the Bible. Another had never held a copy of Homer in his hands. Some girl with a glass eye had never read Dickens or Chaucer. When her best friend admitted she had not read *Moby Dick*, the whole room sighed, “Oh, *Moby Dick*.” “Yes, I never read *Walden*.” “Me...I never read *The Scarlet Letter*.” Finally someone said, “*King Lear*,” and then, “Yeah, *Hamlet*. And *Macbeth*. I didn’t even watch the BBC tapes.” The whole room was giggling and shrugging.

Fischer glanced my way and asked, “Ethan, what about you?” I had yet to speak or respond in any way. The books I had skipped were *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*, but I couldn’t admit this. I’d written a paper that brilliantly tied the novels together as examples of things I can no longer recall; I had claimed Cervantes and Laurence were similar in some crucial way, and had used horseshit words like *anathema*, *foretold* and *augury*. Fischer had awarded the paper an A. I desperately needed him to write me a recommendation to graduate school, so I shrugged and lied, “I’ve never read *The Divine Comedy*.” When the whole room pointed fingers at me and guffawed, I believed I had made a good choice.

Of course, I would find out several months later that mine had been a terrible choice. Fischer had written the letter of recommendation, seven copies sealed away so that I could not read them, and I included them in applications to seven schools. By the end of June I had already received six tiny rejection letters. It was time to start looking for steady, full-time work—I had borrowed a hefty sum to complete my BA. But toward the middle of July I had received only a single job offer...it was at the reception of Collegetown’s water reclamation plant. Bills were piling up and it seemed I had no choice, so I took the job. An obese woman showed me my desk at a window that overlooked massive cesspools. After my first day, I went down to the local wishing fountain to toss a few pennies and entertain some empty hope.

The final letter came several weeks later. It was small, a very bad sign. To my surprise, however, the envelope contained several pages, the first one an original copy of Dr. Fischer’s recommendation. I was stunned to see how short it was, typed on crappy paper without any university heading:

Dear Brother,

It is with accelerated secretions of bile and a swollen colon that I write this warning to you and your academy about a former student of mine, Ethan Onan, who is a fraud and piece of excrement. He deceives in plagiarized essays and lies at dinner parties. It’s true that I awarded him an A in

Gint Aras

my class, but be aware that I was blackmailed by the dean to increase the grades of all my students. It's fitting that a liar like Ethan receive a grade of A, for his degree is worth little, and he has been ripped off mightily by a university that accepts the children of septic tanks and hands them baccalaureates. Like him, his A is a fraud, but I hope he wears it mightily on his chest. Do not under any circumstance accept him.

Cordially,

Dr. Paolo Fischer, PhD, MacArthur Fellow, Pulitzer Prize Winner

Clipped to this was another letter, this one hand-written in green ink and virtually illegible. But I was able to make it out:

Dear Ethan Onan,

Perhaps you'll take the time to read the letter written by your former professor, Dr. Paolo Fischer, my younger brother. He can be very harsh, often ironically; the man hates people who most remind him of himself. If you lied at one of his dinner parties, I can only accuse you of being unoriginal. Perhaps Claudia told you her father picked coffee? She's actually the daughter of a plantation owner AND the heiress of a retired Formula 1 driver, her uncle. Before Paulo won his MacArthur award, Claudia paid the majority of their bills. Ask him if you wish. He'll deny it.

I can see from your application that you've got some talent. I especially like the claim in your personal statement that you learned patience while driving a hearse. That's a gem. My gut tells me to send you one of our standard rejection letters, but why not have some fun? I'll let my brother know that I've accepted you to our doctoral program and will even offer a full scholarship if you can provide me with a skilled, critical review of Jose Lezama Lima's "Paradiso". The novel was handled extensively in your former professor's PhD dissertation, which I'm sure you can find if curious.

To be considered, send the review within fourteen days of this postmark.

Good luck,

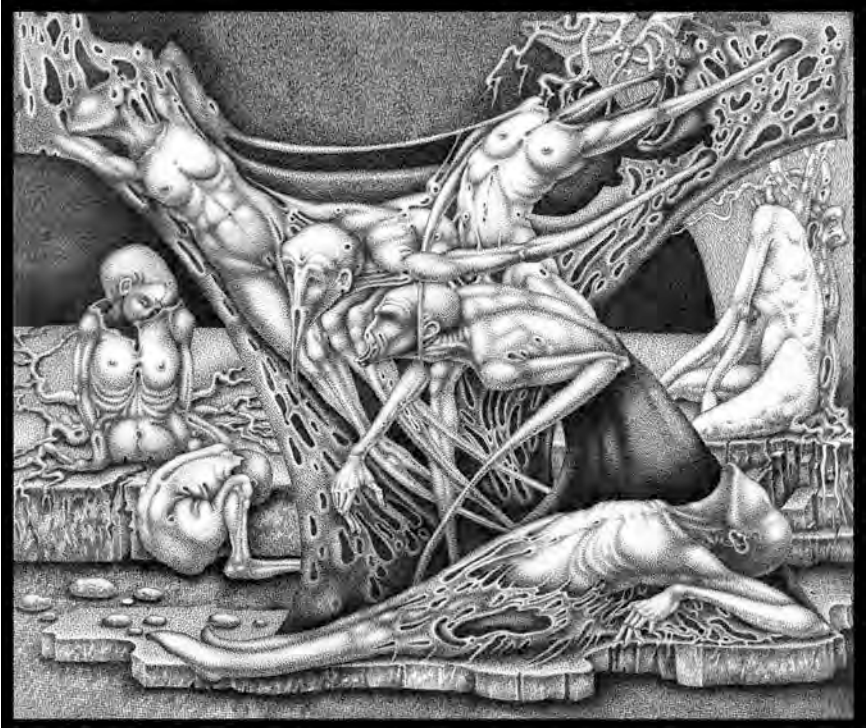
Manuel Fischer

This was my first real glimpse into the politics of the academic world. I'll admit it turned me off. Did I know what I was getting into? Why enter a career populated by these douche bags? I had to remember key words...*tenure, sabbatical, June, July and August*...meaningless terms at the water reclamation plant, a place with douche bags of an illiterate variety: men who gained weight faster than the Korean cleaners could alter their suits; women who sported maroon perms, laid on the blue eye-shadow and carried their feminine items around in canvas sacks.

Still, my job had turned out to be far easier than driving a hearse or

shampooing the rugs in a hotel. The only people who ever called the reception were those in need of a job, lunatics without any friends, sad cases who mistook the plant for the Public Works, and government inspectors announcing their arrival. On some days the phones could be dead for hours, and I had a computer with free internet access. I could use it to look for a website that would provide me with a paper on Lima.

Paradiso, however, turned out to be obscure and would require a custom-written essay. I was able to start a bidding war among four websites, and finally decided to pay cheatthebastards.com just over \$100 for an essay that met my needs. The first paycheck came just in time, and I got the following item within a week. When I read it, I almost demanded a refund. But then I thought, fuck it, it was all the same. I forwarded a hard copy to Mr. Manuel Fischer.



A Dialogue on José Lezama Lima

The Master took his place on a stone under the olive tree where he waited for his pupil each Monday morning. For the first time since their lessons had started, the pupil came a few minutes late, his hair shaggy and

Gint Aras

eyes heavy. The Master knew the young man had not slept a wink, probably because he was finishing his reading assignment. When the pupil sat on his stone, the master began the lesson.

MASTER: Did you finish this week's assignment?

PUPIL: I have finished it, yes.

MASTER: And have you had time to think through the things I assigned, including the questions?

PUPIL: I have, yes.

MASTER: Good. Then let's begin. Tell me about José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso*.

PUPIL: It's a novel published in Cuba in 1966, seven years after the revolution. The events in the book, however, take place before the revolution...I expected the revolution to be a big theme, but unless I have misunderstood some-thing, the book seems to be ignoring it or pushing it far into the background. *Paradiso* is one of those books that has a family tree in the beginning...I was very happy for this...I would have been unable to keep track of the characters. The main one is Jose Cemi, a sickly but also very intelligent son of a Colonel. In the beginning he is only a boy, but Cemi becomes a student and eventually grows up. For some of the book, he and his friends discuss homosexuality. It seems Cemi is having trouble accepting that he is gay. At the end he goes into the world and feels like he can begin his true life. But Lima doesn't say clearly if this is the case.

MASTER: You find the writing unclear?

PUPIL: Very unclear. It was one of the most difficult books I have ever read, more difficult than *Ulysses* or *Gravity's Rainbow*, perhaps easier than *Absalom, Absalom!* But it's much much more difficult than *Tristram Shandy* or *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*.

MASTER: Interesting that you bring up *Shandy* and *Pirelli*. Why are you comparing *Paradiso* to these books?

PUPIL: I'm comparing it to *Ulysses*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Absalom, Absalom!* because it is very demanding of its reader, and because it assumes, as those books do, that its reader will be patient, very intelligent and knowledgeable about literature and history, and also willing to invest a lot of time and energy to finish the book. I compare it to *Shandy* and *Pirelli* because I believe the book is written in a similar tradition. I do not know if Lima has read Laurence Sterne, but I believe he has been influenced by *Tristram Shandy*.

MASTER: What makes you think this?

PUPIL: Like Laurence Sterne, Lima is constantly changing the subject. Sometimes he does it in the middle of a paragraph when even his tenses will shift unexpectedly. There are long parts of *Paradiso*—one chunk is 42 pages long—when Jose Cemi is completely missing. Just as the gentle-