Redeemer
ALSO BY ENRIQUE KRAUZE

Mexico: Biography of Power
REDEEMERS

Ideas and Power in Latin America

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and Nataasha Wimmer

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For Andrea
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The Revolution has been the great Goddess, the eternal Beloved and the great Whore of poets and novelists.

OCTAVIO PAZ
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Preface

*Redeemers* is a history of political ideas in Latin America during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is inspired by Isaiah Berlin's books on Russian thinkers of a somewhat earlier period and Edmund Wilson's mixture of analysis and biography in his *To the Finland Station*. The ideas are my major protagonists but I do not approach them as abstractions. I deal with them as expressed in the lives of human beings for whom—as with Berlin's nineteenth-century Russians—these ideas were developed or adopted with a religious, almost theological seriousness. All these thinkers (and men of action) have their historical importance but I have not included figures who were merely politicians, however powerful, or great writers who never ventured out of their ivory towers. My selection of men (and one woman) is certainly not exhaustive. But they were chosen as representatives of the major themes of Latin American politics. There are great differences among them but this variety is in itself one of my subjects, because the ideas that have formed the modern Latin American political mind arose from a broad and highly varied range of human beings. And they are all figures whose lives were marked by a passion for power, literature, history, and revolution and, for the most part, by love, friendship, and family. Real lives, not walking ideas. The course of Latin American political speculation has been like traffic in two directions on the giant highway of time, from nineteenth-century liberalism toward revolutionary commitments and then back toward modern, more democratic versions of liberal thought. (The
word "liberal" in Latin America has a traditional meaning somewhat different from its American usage. The nineteenth-century Liberals, as opposed to the Conservatives, favored individual liberties and democracy, the separation of church and state, freedom of commerce, and gradual social reforms. The liberal route was the foundation—at least in theory and values—of the original Latin American states.

The religious overtones of the title are intentional. In Latin America, the religious background that stems from an overwhelmingly Catholic culture has always suffused its political reality with moral categories and paradigms. The prophets in my first section (though they all had some religious beliefs) were essentially proponents of important secular ideas. The four Josés (the Cuban Martí, the Uruguayan Rodó, the Mexican Vasconcelos, the Peruvian Mariátegui) configure the revolutionary vocation of the continent with an apostolic zeal and a spirit of sacrifice that arose from a culture intent on the salvation (and domination) of the Indians, established in the sixteenth century by the missionary fathers. These four men were like a torch passed from hand to hand, changing its nature but not its fire as it moved along, from the quondary of the republican Martí (who tried to persuade the United States to abandon its imperial designs on the countries of "our America") to the Hispano-American nationalism of Rodó (whose book Ariel, stimulated by the trauma of the Spanish-American War, marked a multiple shift in the intellectual history of our countries), to the cultural crusade of Vasconcelos, which spread from Mexico throughout Latin America, to the highly original vanguard Marxist and indigenist Mariátegui. All of these men believed in the communion between reader and author through the written word. As intellectuals they were not professors (though Rodó was more so than the others) but made their ordinary living as writers and editors of magazines and books.

As a young man, Octavio Paz wanted to be a "redeemer" and a "hero" and thought that the liberal and democratic order, irremediably lost in the Great War, could be reestablished on morally superior foundations, through socialist revolution. His embrace of Marxism in the year 1930 (Mariátegui would die in the same year) was an intermediate
stage for him but also a natural continuation of the lives of his grandfather, the Liberal, Ireneo Paz, and his father, Octavio Paz Solórzano, a follower of Emiliano Zapata. In the 1930s, much of the Latin American intelligentsia moved strongly to the left, in repudiation of fascism and through a natural sympathy with the embattled Republic in the Spanish Civil War. The alternative of liberal democracy seemed out-of-date. But in Paz's later years (across more than two decades during which I worked very closely with him), he would rediscover it. I treat him at considerable length in this book, using him as a kind of central spine and reference, because he intellectually confronted, for and against, most of the major revolutions of the twentieth century. His books and essays, and the various journals he founded and directed, are fundamental chapters in the intellectual and cultural history of modern Mexico and often of Latin America. His personal and family history is very much a voyage, of going and coming on that highway of ideas, from democratic liberalism to the Mexican Revolution, from the Mexican Revolution to the Russian, from the Russian Revolution back to the Mexican and then back to democratic liberalism. And though Paz took strong anticlerical positions, Christianity is also one of the keys to understanding his trajectory.

The shadow of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* presides over the next sections. The ideas of my first four prophets and the themes of Octavio Paz weave in and out of their lives. The first pair are secular saints, whose images live on in the collective memory of Latin America and much of the world: the meteoric careers of the former actress Eva Perón and the archetypal twentieth-century guerrilla fighter, Che Guevara. In the second pair of lives, I discuss our two greatest contemporary novelists, the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, focusing on their very different viewpoints around the classical theme of Latin American dictatorship. Next I consider the marriage of theology and revolutionary liberation in the lives of two Mexican redeemers of the Indians: the late bishop of Chiapas, Samuel Ruiz, and Subcomandante Marcos, the guerrilla in the mask.

And finally, appearing alone, is a complicated figure, a mélange
On the Translation

*Redeemers* is translated from the Spanish by Hank Heifetz (including all poems and prose selections presented in Spanish, even if drawn from another language, except of course for citations in the original English), but the following exceptions should be noted.

The chapter on García Márquez appears essentially in a translation by Natasha Wimmer. It has been somewhat edited and revised by the author and by Hank Heifetz (and includes a small amount of new material).

The chapter on Hugo Chávez contains substantial material (especially at the beginning, though revised and with a number of additions) from an earlier translation by Wimmer, as does the chapter on Subcomandante Marcos and a portion (also edited) of the chapter on Vargas Llosa.
PART I

Four Prophets
José Martí
THE MARTYRDOM OF THE LIBERATOR

The history of the modern ideas of revolution in Latin America begins with the life, work, and martyrdom of a New Yorker named José Martí. He was born in 1853 in Cuba, an island that, along with other islands (Puerto Rico and the Philippines), was the last bastion of the Spanish Empire. Both of his parents were Spanish. His father, from Valencia, was a sergeant in the army and his mother had been born in the Canary Islands. He had endured poverty as a child and exile since his adolescence. "I have learned how to suffer," he wrote from the prison of La Criolla, at the age of sixteen, to Rafael María de Mendive, a teacher who had inspired his political awakening. Martí’s prison time was spent at hard labor in a quarry, which left him with a permanent and often painful inguinal hernia for the rest of his life. His precocious commitment to the cause of Cuban independence had landed him behind bars. Some months earlier, he had expressed his newfound faith in a one-act drama, adolescent in style, premonitory for its content. In Abdala, a Nubian warrior confronts the Egyptian Empire for the purpose of redeeming his people:

I am Nubian! All my people
await me, to defend their liberty!
A foreign people treads our land
and threatens us with vile slavery;
they boldly display their powerful pikes
and honor commands us and God commands us
to die for the fatherland, rather than see it
a cowardly slave to the barbarous oppressor!

And with his mother, Espírita, Abdala debates a vital question: What is the deepest kind of love?

ESPIRTA. And is that love greater than what your mother awakens in your breast?

ABDALA. Perhaps you believe there is something more sublime than the fatherland?

Abdala’s words would resound along the course of Martí’s life. They would be an essential part of his myth, but the myth would also obscure the luminous side of his personality, as a masterful poet; a bold, original, and surefooted writer of prose; a man of limitless energy and curiosity and a heart overflowing with creative delight and love, above all love.

Deported to Madrid, he took a degree in law and published El presidio político en Cuba (The Political Prison in Cuba), demonstrating that freedom of speech was much greater in Spain itself than in its American colony. He wrote a poem on the execution of medical students in Cuba falsely accused of subversion and, when the first Spanish Republic was proclaimed in 1873, a prose piece titled La República Española ante la revolución cubana (The Spanish Republic Compared to the Cuban Revolution), referring to the failed Cuban revolt of 1868. And there for the first time he applied his idea of the Republic and his conception of liberty to the criticism of imperial domination:

And if Cuba proclaims its independence through the same right that the Republic has proclaimed itself, how can the Republic deny Cuba its right to freedom, the very same it has exercised in order to exist? How can the Republic deny itself to itself? How can it dispose of the fate of a people, imposing a condition upon it where its complete and free and most evident will does not enter?
The words impressively anticipate the statements of American anti-imperialists in 1898—men like Carl Schurz, William James, and Mark Twain—faced with the American annexationist war in Cuba and the occupation of the Philippines. A republic cannot suffocate another republic, without denying its own essence. The idea of the Republic is a constant refrain in Martí's concept of revolution. From 1873 on, he would always be a classic republican, committed to democracy, to civilian (not military) rule, and a sworn enemy of tyranny and personalist power (caudillismo).

His concept of revolution was a legacy of the American Revolution and the later Latin American wars of independence against Spain. Years later Martí would write, with passion and sympathy, about the Martyrs of Chicago (the execution of innocent anarchists after the "Haymarket Riot," when a bomb-throwing incident in 1886 killed a policeman). And earlier, in 1883, he mourned, discreetly, the death of Karl Marx, but never applying partisan terms nor the concept of revolution itself that would later become common usage. And he would use the occasion to warn against violence:

Karl Marx is dead. He deserves honor, because he stood with the weak. But he does not do well who points to harm and burns with generous anxiety to relieve it, but rather he who teaches a gentle remedy for that hurt. The task of launching men against men is frightening. Turning some men into beasts for the good of others is unworthy. But one has to find an outlet for indignation so that the beast may halt in its tracks, before it leaps, and be frightened away.

Until the moment (in 1882) when he chose to settle down in New York City, Martí was a wandering Cuban across "great America." He was a short, slender man, with a passionate and hyperactive temperament. He considered living in Mexico or Guatemala, where he wrote for journals, gave lectures, and collected admiration and fame. In both countries he left loyal friends, evasive or enamored women (one who
languished and died when he moved on), but he left both countries behind, disdaining their dictators or their local luminaries, men always uneasy with the presence of a man without a country who proclaimed himself the citizen of a greater country, the “country of America.” Martí then thought he might go to Honduras or to Peru. “It’s very hard, wandering this way, from land to land, with so much anguish in my soul,” but in that same soul a certainty “was seething”: “In my head I carry my unhappy people and it seems to me that one day their freedom will depend on a breath from me.”

In Mexico, he met (and would later marry) Carmen Zayas-Bazán, a Cuban of aristocratic descent. And Martí decided to return to Cuba with her. It was a discreet return, using only his middle name and his matronymic as a semi-pseudonym (he would enter Cuba as Julián Pérez). He tried, briefly, to settle into his native land, where his son, José Francisco, was born in November 1878. But the call of his conscience drew him rapidly into conspiracy against the government and he was deported again to Spain, where he remained very briefly.

In 1880 he came to New York and began to solicit funds for a second Cuban attempt at independence, the so-called “Little War” (La Guerra Chiquita). With a force of twenty-five men, General Calixto García set sail for Cuba, only to meet with another defeat. Martí remained in New York, as interim president of the Cuban Revolutionary Committee.

He was living at 51 East Twenty-ninth Street, in the home of Manuel Mantilla, a Cuban exile who was very ill and would die a few years later. With Mantilla were his wife, María Miyares, a Venezuelan, and their two children. When his own wife and son arrived from Cuba, Martí rented a house in Brooklyn. But Carmen never comprehended nor came to terms with her husband’s political passion (her father thought he was a “loco”). In October she returned to Cuba. One month later, María Miyares de Mantilla gave birth to a daughter she named María. Her father was not Manuel but José Martí, who became the girl’s godfather. Martí then spent a brief time in Venezuela, María’s native land, where he founded an ephemeral publication (the Revista Venezolana) and announced “I am a son of America — Give me, Venezuela,
a way to serve you, in me she will have a son.” But the supremely vain
Venezuelan president, Antonio Guzmán Blanco (disgruntled because
Martí had not mentioned him in a public speech), decided to expel him.
Martí returned to New York. His mother requested, his wife demanded
that he come back to Cuba. He would write to Carmen,

You say I should come back. If it meant dying when I arrive, I
would gladly give up my life! I don’t have to force myself to go,
but rather to not go back That you don’t value it [Martí’s politi-
cal work], that I know. But I don’t have to commit the injustice of
asking you to value a grandeur that is merely spiritual, secret and
unproductive.

It was a marital tension that could not be resolved: Carmen did not
understand his mission and would never support it.

The contours of the drama were established. Exiled from his country
in order to serve the revolution, estranged from his wife and bereft of
the son he adored, consoled by his secret affair with a married woman
and walks in the park with his “goddaughter,” Martí would live only
thirteen years more. Carmen and his son, José Francisco, would still al-
ternate long periods in Cuba with time in New York until the final break
in August 1891, after which he would never see his son again. All through
that decade he would lessen his personal anguish with the dedicated
passion of his work, as an active strategist, ideologue, orator, prophet,
and, in the end, moral caudillo of the Cuban independence movement.
He would publish short, beautiful books of poetry. He would translate
novels, edit books and journals; and he would let himself be carried
away by a voracious desire to understand and make others understand
the marvels of this strange and dizzying city that had accepted him.

New York was now his home, or at least his home away from home.
Dealing with this environment into which he had settled, “struggling
to dominate the beautiful and rebellious English language,” Martí
would become the innovator, in Spanish, of the journalistic column in
the form of an extended letter. As he wrote to Bartolomé Mitre, editor
of the major Argentine newspaper, *La Nación*, he wanted to write from New York neither to denounce nor to praise but to offer a lively and intelligent vantage point from which to observe a reality that was important for Latin Americans to understand.

Everything astonished him. His copious accounts are a primary source for the study of a decade of life in the United States, not only of the transition from a more or less peaceful application of the Monroe Doctrine to active and militarily aggressive imperialism but also and mainly about everyday matters and national events: the trial of President Garfield's assassin, the inauguration of President Cleveland (and the trousseau of his fiancée), the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, the bustle of a Sunday at Coney Island, the fashions of Fifth Avenue, diversions (dances, sleigh rides, regattas, boxing matches, baseball games), the crimes and criminals of New York, the death of Jesse James, the wonderful bouillabaisse served by Madame Taurel in Hanover Square, which was then the center of the financial district; art exhibitions, openings of plays, details of the Oklahoma land boom and the wars out west against the Sioux. And in one of these long epistolary pieces, written for *La Nación* in 1886, on the installation of the Statue of Liberty in New York Bay, he writes the kind of encomium that generations of immigrants would feel, though less eloquently, as their ships slowed down to enter the great harbor of the Land of Hope:

There she is finally, on her pedestal higher than the towers, magnificent as the tempest and as kind as the sky! Any dry eyes in her presence once again learn what tears are. It seemed that souls were opening and flying up to shelter themselves in the folds of her tunic, whisper in her ears, settle on her shoulders to die, like butterflies in the light! She seemed alive; smoke from the steamboats enveloped her: a vague clarity crowned her. She was truly like an altar, with the steamboats kneeling at her feet! She has been created by all the skill of the universe, as freedom is created from all the sufferings of men.
José Martí

He saw the faults and the virtues of the Colossus of the North. And the dangers for Latin America. The overwhelming emphasis on money did not seem to him "a sound basis for a nation, this exclusive love, vehement and uneasy, for material fortune that ruins people here, or polishes them only on one side, giving them the appearance of being simultaneously colossi and children." And stemming from these values, "a cluster of avaricious thinkers" yearned for expansion at the cost of the territories of "our America." Certainly it seemed to him that it was "a deeply painful thing to see a turtledove die at the hands of an ogre." But one should not confuse "a circle of ultra-'eagletes' [agüilistas—a word Martí coined from the symbol of the eagle and applied to American chauvinists]" with the thought of a "heterogeneous, hard-working, conservative people, occupied with itself, and because of these same varied strengths, well-balanced." And faced with the cultural inertia of Spain in America, Martí felt an urgent need to explain the United States "to bring into the light all its magnificent qualities, and to highlight, with all its positive strengths, this splendid struggle of men."

For a decade, Martí's columns appeared every week in La Nación and later in as many as twenty Latin American newspapers. Although he was an electrifying speaker, the orator's quality of rousing rhetoric barely appears in his articles. An observation he made in 1881, about a single interesting word, reflects his sense of the proper style for his innovative journalism: "The bare word, vigorous, colloquial, natural, colorful, the sincere word, candid, simple, the word 'yankee, this was the word used by Henry Ward Beecher." And, in fact, it was in New York that Martí began to change the language of Latin American Spanish, shifting away from what he termed metaphors replete with "suffering and victimhood," expressions like "to write our history with blood," toward descriptions and structures that rely on demonstrative logic. In the North American press and literature he discovered a freedom without fear and without the need to harangue. Speaking up, writing, publishing cease to be merely forms of rebellion and become a profession, "lively, simple, useful, human conversation," a public discussion. Martí
has stopped thinking in abstract terms or delivering lessons from on high. He speaks directly with the reader. He pours the old wine of the highest Spanish literary tradition (the poets and dramatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Golden Age, which he knew in vivid detail from his period in Spain) into the new wineskins of North American journalism. Viewed from that perspective, Martí was the first modern writer of Latin America.

And not only as a journalist. Devoted as he was to the cause of Cuban liberation, Martí had no conscious, aesthetic intention of renovating the language but he did just that through three channels: his columns, his books of poetry, and his letters. Journalism in the Spanish language had never before reached the artistic level Martí achieved and his best-known book of poetry, Ismaelillo, predated and anticipated, by nearly a decade, the first modernist currents of poetry in Spanish.

The fifteen poems of Ismaelillo (published in 1882) are inspired by the deprivation he felt after the departure for Cuba of his son, known affectionately as Pepito. The language is simple, elegant, totally free of nineteenth-century romantic rhetoric yet threaded with sudden, often surprising images, looking forward to modernism and back to the Spanish poets of the seventeenth-century Golden Age (El Siglo de Oro). Not only his absent and longed-for son, but his quest for political and expressive freedom enter into the verses:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The air is inhabited} \\
\text{by diminutive eagles:} \\
\text{They are ideas soaring up,} \\
\text{their prisons shattered!}
\end{align*}
\]

Yet everywhere (perhaps even with the choice of a word like “diminutive”) a remembered infant pervades the brief, influential collection:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Is what swathes him} \\
\text{flesh or mother-of-pearl?}
\end{align*}
\]
José Martí

His laugh, as if in a cup
of Arabian onyx,
bubbles up in triumph
on his unmarred chest
Here you are! pale bone
here! alive and everlasting!
I am the son of my son!
It is he who renews me!

The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno—who compared José Martí to the high priest of Italian unification, Giuseppe Mazzini—said about Martí that he was “a man of feeling as much or more than a man of thought.” In Martí’s letters (to friends and political partisans, and which were published years after his death) Unamuno saw the mark of two illustrious Spanish predecessors in letter-writing as art—the Roman Seneca and St. Teresa de Ávila.

New York would always both fascinate and disturb him. Writing to his most frequent correspondent, the Mexican Manuel Mercado, Martí would say, “Everything binds me to New York, at least through some years of my life; everything binds me to this cup of poison.” Distant from his family and not drawn to the provocative life available to a man alone in the great city, he had to work at meagerly paid and uninspiring jobs for various business houses. The idea of becoming an editor offered him a hope for improving his life, a possibility that seemed to flow naturally from his positive evaluation of the work ethic that surrounded him. He would write, “Here a good idea always finds welcoming, soft, fertile ground. One must be intelligent, that is all. Do something useful and you will have everything you want. Doors are shut for those who are dull and lazy; life is secure for those who obey the law of work.” Martí saw himself as someone who could translate North American culture for Latin Americans and build a bridge of understanding between the two Americas. He had been surprised to see (like the Argentine Sarmiento on his travels in 1847) that everybody here seemed to read, and he thought of inspiring a broader spectrum of
Latin Americans to adopt the same practice. He had done a brief stint as editor of a scientific journal (La América, where he had published pieces on the advantages of some types of fertilizer and the excellence of certain cheeses). Based on this limited experience, he floated a plan in 1886 to establish, with some of his Mexican friends, "a noble and extensive American enterprise" that would publish "cheap and useful books human and highly topical, to instill character and prepare people for practical work."

Martí's attempt to create a publishing venture for all Latin America, beginning with Mexico, coincided with a parenthesis in the urgency (though never in the commitment) of his political activity. In the middle of the 1880s, after two failed attempts to overthrow the Spanish colonial government, Martí advised his followers to wait until internal Cuban conditions could mature to a point when the revolutionaries might be received with sympathy and efficiency—to ensure that a war would be conducted with minimum suffering and maximum benevolence, setting the stage for a free and harmonious republic. He was especially disturbed by the personalist caudillismo of the men who had led the two previous wars, Antonio Maceo and Máximo Gómez. He had come to know both of them in 1882 in New York. In 1884, he had written to Gómez:

But there is something beyond any personal sympathy that you can inspire in me and it is my determination not to contribute—through blind love of an idea that dominates my life—even an iota toward bringing a regime of personal despotism to my land, which would be more shameful and ill-fated than the political despotism it now endures, and graver and more difficult to uproot, because it will arrive with the excuse of certain values, embellished by the ideas it would incarnate, and legitimized by triumph. The fatherland belongs to no one and if it does—this only in spirit—it will be his who serves it with the greatest detachment and intelligence [Such a person] might very likely be you,
or it might not be you. To respect a people who love us and place their hopes on us, is the height of grandeur. To make use of their suffering and their enthusiasm for one’s own private benefit; that would be the height of ignominy.

His project for producing “cheap and useful books” is never accepted by his Mexican friends. They see no possible market for the venture. Nor does he succeed in getting a Mexican publisher for his translation of the novel Ramona by Helen Hunt Jackson, even though “it is a good book, on a Mexican theme.” The parenthesis of relative political inactivity has begun to close. On the tenth of October 1886, a day on which the Cuban community honored the outbreak of the first unsuccessful war against Spain, Martí returns to giving public speeches, and his words circulate through the Cuban community from New York to Florida. His office at 120 Front Street becomes a meeting place not only for Cubans but for other Latin Americans: “it’s come to be like a stock market of nations.” In 1887, his father, the former Spanish army sergeant, dies; Martí admits to having never understood him. To his oldest Cuban friend he writes: “I will die here, Fermín, without being able to put this ardent activity to use, other than indirectly and unhappily.” He meant of course his dedication to the freedom of Cuba: “The truth is I live now only for my country.”

Martí had long been impressed with the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the poetry of Walt Whitman. Like both of these writers (but especially Whitman) he was a man of insight and emotion, not a builder of systems. But both Americans contributed to what became one of Martí’s central tenets: freedom is a resource you must secure for yourself. No one else can give it to an individual or to a nation. For Cuba he was concerned (at least as much as for its freedom) with creating conditions that would permit his country to govern itself democratically. And he gave his opinion (in a letter to his friend Gonzalo de Quesada in 1889) on the proposal of José Ignacio Rodríguez for a negotiated and peaceful grant of independence mediated by the United States:
it is guided by the confidence, for me impossible, that the nation that has need of us (for reasons of geography, strategy, property and politics) will pull us out of the hands of the Spanish government and then give us our freedom, so that we may conserve what we did not acquire and that we could use against the interests of those who have granted it to us. Confidence of this kind is a generous feeling but as for its being rational, I cannot concur. And once the United States is in Cuba, who will get them out of there?

For Martí there were four problems to be addressed: the danger of caudillismo; the methods for winning independence; the pressure toward annexing Cuba to the United States, favored by some Cubans as well as North Americans; and finally the general attitude of the United States toward the island. Martí was compelled to discuss, analyze, and mediate between various, conflicting forces. He knew very well that the Cubans were confronting a bureaucratic Spanish Empire, sclerotic and tyrannous, under whose reign there were no citizens but only subjects. Yet Martí would insist that the struggle was for independence, not a war against the Spaniards: “We Cubans began the war and we and the Spaniards will finish it. Let them not maltreat us and we will not maltreat them. Let them show respect and we will respect them. Steel responds to steel, friendship to friendship.”

The American press was beginning to discuss the pros and cons of annexing Cuba. On the island, many well-off Cubans approved of the idea. Annexation, they believed, would transform them into large-scale businessmen and vastly enhance the value of their landholdings. (They pointed to the example of Texas, where a few decades earlier, barren and unused Mexican land had become highly valued American properties.) The rumors kept spreading, under the growing influence of the “yellow press” powered by William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper mogul who could perhaps create a war. Martí immediately recognized the importance of a public discussion. In a letter to New York’s Evening Post on March 21, 1889, titled “A Vindication of
Cuba," he spoke up for Cuban workers in the United States and their love of freedom:

They admire this nation, the greatest that freedom has ever established; but they do not trust the disastrous elements that, like worms in the blood, have begun their work of destruction in this marvelous Republic. They have made the heroes of this country their own heroes and they yearn for the ultimate success of the North-American Union as the greatest glory of humanity; but they cannot honorably believe that the excessive individualism, the adoration of wealth and the prolonged jubilation over a terrible victory are preparing the United States to become the nation that typifies freedom, which must be a country without opinions based on the immoderate appetite for power or acquisition or triumphs that are opposed to goodness and justice.

Confronted with the new ideology of American expansionism ("We are the Romans of this continent," said the jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes), Martí, always a prudent man, was shedding his original admiration. At first he felt estranged, then wounded, betrayed, trampled by a monster. And he did not know how to reconcile the irreconcilable. The United States had accepted him as an equal, a free man within its public life (an unaccustomed welcome for the wanderer), but the machinery of power was priming to crush his dream of a fatherland without even taking it into account. They seemed about to concede Cuba an existence within a North American agenda but to absolutely ignore the Cuban point of view. "What almost pulls the ground out from under my feet is the danger I see of my land falling bit by bit into hands that must stifle it." And not only Cuba had to endure this affliction but also "peoples of the same origin and composition as mine."

In July 1889, a remarkable monthly journal began to appear, directed by Martí. It was called La Edad de Oro (The Golden Age) and was his final attempt at salvation through the culture of the printed word. The
magazine published stories, parables, poems, and other writings of interest to children. But it lasted only four issues, until Martí rejected his sponsor’s insistence on including religious themes. By then, thoughts of departure and death reappeared, as in the poem to his friend and fellow militant Serafín Sánchez:

as if there had entered within me
Storms of silence, precursor
Of that much greater silence
Where all of us are equal.
And after baking the bread
With the pain of every day,
The pen gone dead in my hand,
I enfold myself in the hurricane
And about me I have to tell you
That in proceeding I am serene.
Without fear of thunder or lightning,
I am preparing the future.

His pronouncements also grew in intensity, disappointment, and anger: “the United States, instead of strengthening its democracy and saving itself from the hatred and misery of monarchies, is growing corrupt and diminishing democracy; and hate and misery, with all their menace, are reborn.” At the beginning of 1891, he would write “Our America,” the cornerstone of Latin Americanism in the twentieth century.

He began the piece with a statement of pride in what Latin America had achieved, countries that “with their silent masses of Indians” had advanced to create “compact and progressive nations.” But the future did not lie in imitating the United States or following the fashionable patterns of French-inspired thought. “You cannot parry a weapon thrust at a plainsman’s horse with a decree from Alexander Hamilton. A sentence from Sieyès [the philosopher of constitutionalism in the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras] will not loosen the clotted blood of the
Indian race Neither the European nor the Yankee book hold the key to the Latin-American enigma." Martí now uses the word yanqui with a new negative weight. He still feels that the form of a republic is "the logical government" but now he adds, "If the republic does not open its arms to everyone and move forward for the benefit of everyone, the republic will die."

In April 1892, he joined with other Cuban leaders in founding the Cuban Revolutionary Party. Among them was Máximo Gómez, the general to whom Martí had written his letter rejecting caudillismo. (Gómez was a Dominican who had joined the cause of Cuban liberation, just as many Latin Americans would transcend national boundaries to enter revolutionary movements in the twentieth century.) The party's statement of basic principles, written by Martí, contained a commitment to "the absolute independence of the Island of Cuba" and support for the independence of Puerto Rico. The necessary war for independence must be brief and "generous"; all factions must unite to create, "through a war of the spirit using republican methods," a durable nation that would attend to the well-being of its citizens and be "duly conscious of its difficult geographical situation." And after winning the war, the party was not to stay in power and mimic "the authoritarian spirit and bureaucratic composition of the Colony" but encourage the development of "a new country, sincerely democratic," aware of the need for a "balance of social forces" and "the dangers of sudden freedom in a society created by slavery."

Toward the United States, Martí does not preach hatred, nor does he show any ideological prejudice against the country that had been his home for thirteen years. Because he knew them well, he writes to warn the Americans, not to attack them. North American ignorance and greed are the problems; they must be replaced by respect for Latin America.

Martí is not yet forty years old but his letters are full of thoughts of his mortality and of the impending war. With the formation of the party, he resigned his various positions as consul in New York for Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay and as president of the Hispanic Literary Society. He began to travel widely again, pursuing economic and
political support for the revolutionary venture. He went to the Cuban communities of Florida, then to the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico, where the perpetual president Porfirio Díaz himself would donate twenty thousand pesos to his cause. In March 1895, along with General Gómez, who would lead the expeditionary force, Martí would sign and issue, from the Dominican Republic, the famous Manifesto of Montecristi. More than a declaration of war, it was a preliminary plan for the future constitution of the Republic of Cuba. And he sent a letter (to the Dominican writer Federico Henríquez y Carvajal) that is often considered his political testament:

it will never be triumph but agony and duty. My blood is burning. Now is the time to give respect and a human feeling to sacrifice, to make war viable and indelible. I will rouse the world. But my single desire would be to stand firm there, clinging to the last trunk, the last fighter, to die in silence. For me the hour has come.

In his letters and poems, Martí says good-bye to almost everyone. A few, stern lines to his son. Nothing to his wife. To his mother, a sentence almost identical to the conclusion of his adolescent drama Abdala: “You mourn, with the anger of your love, the sacrifice of my life; and why did you give birth to me as a life in love with sacrifice?” To my “very good Carmita,” the elder daughter of María Miyares, he says that he loves her as if she were his own daughter and urges her to care for her mother and her brother. And he writes to “my María,” his own natural child who was then fourteen, and takes the time to advise her on scientific readings, and offer some subtle thoughts on the essence of love and practical ideas about her possible future vocation. He counsels her to put her trust in language: “Learn from me. I have life on one side of the table, death on the other, and my people on my shoulders: and see how many pages I am writing!” At the end of his letter, he asks her to feel “cleansed and weightless, like the light” and “if you never see me again, place a book on my tomb. Or on your breast, because there
I will be buried if I die somewhere that men will not discover. Work. A kiss. And hope for me.”

On April 1, 1895, a boat sailed for Cuba from the Dominican Republic, carrying leaders of the Cuban Revolutionary Party, including the writer and former New Yorker José Martí. The exiles landed on April 11 and connected with resistance forces on the island. José Martí began his war. For others it would go on for years, till the Americans invaded in 1898 and Spain was finally defeated. For Martí it lasted little more than a month. He had time to reencounter the beautiful island he had yearned to see again. It was an epiphany for him, and his Diary was a literary consecration of the experience. He sees and names and re-creates the natural world and the Cuban people and their customs in memorable and moving detail.

His death was due to a mixture of military ineptitude, foolhardy bravery (he may have been intent on refuting slurs about his lack of fighting experience), and the abandonment to the prospect of a martyr's death clearly evident in his writings. He had a special guard assigned to him (his name was Ángel de la Guardia, literally “guardian angel”) but he did not listen to his warnings. On May 19, at Dos Ríos, where two rivers meet, he moved ahead of the rebel troop emplacement and, with only one man mounted beside him, charged a small squad of Spanish soldiers. They shot him off his horse. A Cuban “mulatto” serving as scout for the Spanish army came upon his dying body and recognizing him, cried out, “You here, Don Martí!” The scout then gave him the coup de grâce. The Spaniards moved forward to empty his pockets, loosely bury the body, and then dig it up and bury it again after confirming the identification. All his life, Martí had expected, even craved such a death that could be the beginning of redemption for himself and for his people.

On the day before he was killed, he had written a letter—one more that would become famous—to his close friend Manuel Mercado:

Every day now I am in danger of giving my life for my country and for my duty to prevent in good time, with the independence
of Cuba, the United States spreading across the Antilles and falling, strengthened by its conquests, on our territories of America. What I have done up to now, and will do, is for that [purpose] to prevent—through annexation by those imperialists and the Spaniards—a road opening up in Cuba, one that has to be sealed off—and we are sealing it off with our blood—toward the annexation of our peoples of America to the turbulent and brutal North that has contempt for us I have lived inside the monster and I understand its entrails—and my sling is that of David.

A few years later, in the streets of Havana, a song of mourning, in the syncopated Afro-Cuban rhythm of the clave, began to be heard:

Martí, he should not have died  
Ay, his dying!  
If Martí had not died  
a different rooster would crow,  
the fatherland would be saved  
and Cuba would be happy.  
Martí should not have died!  
Ay, his dying!

In his future as a myth, Martí had not died. Nor would he ever die. His body now rests in the Santa Ifigenia Cemetery in Santiago de Cuba. Before 1959, all Cubans remembered him as the redeemer who gave his life for the independence of the island, which was accomplished according to some, partial or thwarted according to many others. After 1959, the revolutionaries in power claimed him as one of their own. They saw themselves as the new “sling of David” and believed they had completed his work. Many in the growing body of Cuban exiles focused on his warning that a caudillo could overthrow a tyranny “to replace it, through all the prestige of triumph, with his own.” They also saw themselves in the mirror of that man in constant exile, who had labored for the independence of Cuba. In a sense he
belongs to them both, the redeemers and those who reject their version of redemption. And he belongs, with great distinction, to the history of Spanish literature.

Martí had initiated the new era of revolutionary thought in Latin America. Other, and different, voices would soon be heard.
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