

## *HOUSE ORGAN*

### *Ave atque Vale, Fidel*

Too ill to meet with the large number of well-wishers who gathered in Havana to celebrate his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Fidel Castro sent them instead a poignant farewell message. We reproduce most of it below:

Havana. November 29, 2006

#### **Message from President Fidel Castro to participants in the celebrations for his 80th birthday**

Dear compatriots and dear friends from all over the world:

During this time, I have worked intensely to guarantee in our country the objectives of the Proclamation of the 31st of July.

Now we find ourselves facing an adversary who has led the United States into a disaster of such magnitude, that it is almost certain that the U.S. people themselves will not allow him to conclude his presidential mandate.

In addressing you, intellectuals and prominent individuals of the world, I was in a dilemma: I could not bring you all together in a small venue. It was only within the Karl Marx Theater that all of the visitors would fit and, according to my doctors, I was still not in a condition to face such a colossal encounter.

I opted for the variant of speaking to all of you utilizing this channel. My thinking is well-known regarding José Martí's ideas of glories and honors, when he said that they can all fit on a grain of corn.

Your generosity really overwhelms me. There are so many people that I would like to mention here that once again, I am opting not to do so, and I ask you to forgive me for mentioning just one name: that of Oswaldo Guayasamín, because he was able to synthesize many of the best virtues of those present here.

He made four portraits of me. The first one that he painted in 1961 was lost. I looked for it in every possible corner, and it never appeared. I suffered so much when I found out what an exceptional person Guayasamín was. The second was in 1981 and is kept at the Casa Guayasamín in Old Havana. The third, in 1986, is kept at the "Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Man." How far we were, he and I, when we first met, from imagining that the fourth portrait would be his birthday gift in August 1996. How inspired his words were when he said: "From Quito and in any corner of the Earth, leave a light burning, because

I will be back later." About Oswaldo Guayasamín, I wrote one day, during the inauguration of the Capilla del Hombre, "He was the most noble, transparent and humane person I have ever known. He created at the speed of light, and his magnitude as a human being was limitless."

As long as the planet exists and human beings breathe, the work of creators will exist. Today, moreover, thanks to technology, the work and knowledge that humanity has created throughout thousands of years is within everyone's reach, even though it is not yet known how human beings are affected by the radiation from billions of computers and cell phones.

Recently, the prestigious World Wildlife Fund, based in Switzerland and considered internationally to be the most important NGO overseeing the global environment, stated that all of the measures taken by Cuba to protect the environment made it the only country on Earth that meets the minimum requirements for sustainable development. This is an encouraging honor for our country, but of little importance in the world, given the weight of its economy. . . .

"¡Hasta la victoria siempre!"

Finally, dear friends, who have done us the immense honor of visiting our country, I very sorrowfully take my leave of you, because I was not able to personally thank you and embrace each one of you. We have the duty to save our species.

Fidel Castro Ruz

And we most sorrowfully take our leave of you, Fidel, who have done us the immense honor of visiting our world and making it a better place.

The future will grant this man with the honor he deserves, for his vision, his courage and audacity, and perhaps also, for a certain charmed existence. Greatness is not perfection—indeed, the greater the individual, the more contradictions have to be embraced, and therefore the less perfect must be the outcome. It is rather the capacity to imagine and act at the level of the whole. Here Fidel has been sublime, and never more so than in his last days, as he invokes the obligation to save our species.

No one has excited more controversy, including on the Left, where innumerable social democrats, anarchists and Trotskyists have taken pot-shots over the years at one unresolved contradiction or another. But as Castro's life draws to a close, the balance sheet is not so difficult to establish.

Consider who hates and calumniates him. Look at the faces of Miami's *gusanos*, slaving with revenge, or at their gangster-accomplices in Washington. During the Contra wars against the Sandinistas, the CIA tried to frighten the peasants of Nicaragua from using

health clinics by spreading the word that the vaccines were made with Castro's urine. What had the man done to deserve such a delusion?

Then there are the hopes Fidel has kept alive. Here are two examples from my own experience.

In 1994 I took part in the third Pastors for Peace caravan to break the Yankee blockade of Cuba, in which we gathered material aid from across the United States, crossed the border in Laredo, Texas and drove our vehicles to Tampico for shipment to Cuba. The trip from the U.S.-Mexican border to Tampico is long and dreary and passes through a region of grim poverty. But the peasants came to the road, time and again, shouting ¡Viva Cuba! and cheering us on. I could not say which of us was the happiest. And then the dockworkers of Tampico offered more celebrations and took the day off to load the Cuban ship gratis. 'Solidarity' is a shopworn word in our political lexicon. Castro has been the genius who has brought it into life like no other in our time. Cuba's heroism against United States aggression has inspired Latin America since 1960, and is one of the necessary conditions for the current revival of the Left across the continent. Churchill is celebrated for rallying Britain against the Nazi threat. Castro has done the same for Cuba, against far greater odds, and for ten times as long.

I saw more of the man's impact a year later, when Fidel made one of his rare trips to the UN, visiting, as was his custom, Harlem. A ceremony was held for him at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, which I was fortunate to attend. One saw there a little-known fact about the American political scene: the amazing love of those of African descent for this man whose audacity had led to military intervention in Angola, where the armies of the racist Afrikaner regime were defeated and a way was opened for South Africa's liberation.

Not a bad life, then, to keep a faith that opens upon the liberation of two continents—and the vision that has set at least one nation-state on a path toward ecological sanity.

One final observation, on the role played by literature in Castro's extraordinary life, or from another angle, the function of texts in history. I was struck quite a few years ago to learn from his memoir on religion that Castro's favorite novel was *Don Quixote* and that he had read it no fewer than six times. Undoubtedly, then, Fidel identifies with the famous Knight Errant. Yet Don Quixote is widely perceived as the quintessential fool and madman, and the epithet, 'quixotic,' has been reserved for losers who vainly pursue hopeless causes.

But does not Castro give the lie to this fearful and cynical interpretation of Cervantes' great creation? The kind of mentality that regards Cuba as a lost and hopeless cause will no doubt endorse the conventional view. But such a mind is trapped in the dead-end time imposed by the ruling order. To the mind that sees dialectically and recognizes that Castro's life, and the Cuban revolution, has radiated a kind of exemplary glory for the wretched of the earth, and that it has propelled struggle onward—a struggle that now expands into a battle for the survival of life itself—to this way of seeing, the Knight Errant, with Fidel his avatar, is a true hero of history. Yes, such a one "errs," and experience needs to supply correctives. But the propulsive force behind such a genius cannot be set aside. It is

a kind of “enchantment” (a better word than madness) that, seeking justice, moves us onward.

I like to think that Fidel found the following passage, spoken by Quixote to Sancho Panza, particularly moving:

I know and believe that I am enchanted, and that suffices to make my conscience easy, for it would weigh heavily on me if I thought I was not enchanted, and in sloth and cowardice had allowed myself to be imprisoned in this cage, depriving the helpless and the weak of the assistance I could provide, for at this very moment there must be many in urgent need of my succor and protection.

Fidel Castro, *¡presente!*

—Joel Kovel