




## LIVING BY HIS PEN

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 Martí arrived in New York on January 3, 1880. The first thing he did was get in touch with the Cuban community of rebels in exile. He became a member of the Cuban Revolutionary Committee and immediately began writing, lecturing, and teaching on behalf of the revolution. From the beginning, he attempted to bring all the separate parties together and unite them under one banner.

By September 1880, it had become obvious that the Little War was over. Martí and other officials of the Revolutionary Committee wrote to

the few elements of the revolutionary army that were still fighting and urged them to lay down their arms. It was useless for them to continue. It would be better to regroup and prepare for the future struggle, which Martí was sure was coming. The Revolutionary Committee was disbanded, and Martí was forced to take stock of his situation. The outlook was not good.

Carmen joined Martí in New York for a while, but they quarreled about his commitment to the coming revolution. Carmen even admitted that she was quite content to live under Spanish rule. She returned to Cuba with her son in January 1881, leaving Martí alone in New York. Martí was not the single-minded revolutionary he appeared to be. He cared for his family, especially his son, José, for whom he wrote his first book of verse, *Ismaelillo* (Little Ishmael). In fifteen poems, he describes the anguish he feels at being separated from his son. Martí's intense desire to be reunited with his son can also be seen as his longing for a return to Cuba, from which he had been separated for so long. He also attempts to pass on to his son a moral code to guide him in the path to virtue. The great Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío called *Ismaelillo* a guide to the art of being a father.<sup>1</sup>

With *Ismaelillo*, Martí also broke new ground as a poet. He knew that he was doing something



Martí dedicated his first book of poems, *Ismaelillo*, to his son, José.

different. In his dedication to his son, he says, "If someone should tell you that these pages resemble others, tell him I love you too much to thus dishonor you. I depict you just as my eyes have seen you."<sup>2</sup> The simplicity of the verses are a far cry from the flowery style of the Spanish Romantic poets. The book has been recognized by literary historians as the first example of the Modernist movement in Latin American literature. This movement in poetry was noted for turning its back on traditional methods and using new forms and meters. It used everyday language and was not restricted to the use of rhyme. *Ismaelillo* became a landmark in the history of Latin American poetry.

With the end of the Revolutionary Committee in New York, Martí no longer had a base from which to continue his crusade for independence, and he had to make a living. He again took up his pen, but this time to write of more general things, such as his observations and feelings about the United States. One of his first published pieces, called "Impressions of America," appeared in the magazine *Hour*. This led to a series that became a feature of the magazine. He also began writing articles for *The New York Sun*. The editor of the *Sun* was Charles A. Dana, who became Martí's friend and a faithful supporter in the years to come. Martí wrote articles for all of the

Spanish-language publications in New York, and he even had time to edit a magazine, *La Edad de Oro* (The Golden Age), for Spanish-speaking children. He even wrote a novel, *Amistad funesta* (Sad Friendship), under an assumed name. This took him only seven days, and his haste must have shown, because it received some very bad reviews. One critic wrote that it was “dull, diffuse, if not artificial and false.”<sup>3</sup> It has some interest, though, because the hero, Juan Jerez, embodies so many of the feelings and personal circumstances of Martí himself:

He traveled because he was full of eagles, which gnawed at his body, and wanted wide spaces, and were suffocating in the prison of the city. He traveled because he was married to a woman whom he thought he had loved, and whom he then found like an insensible cup, in which the harmonies of his soul found no echo.<sup>4</sup>

In 1887, Martí discovered a book that seemed to mirror his own feelings about the injustice done to the native Indian population of Mexico. It was Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*, and the fact that it was written by a North American interested Martí. He wrote: “Our race . . . [is] recognized in all of its goodness by a famous writer among those who have most disdained us.”<sup>5</sup> Martí was stretching the truth a little here because he could hardly be





The first edition of *La Edad de Oro* (*The Age of Gold*), a monthly magazine for children published and edited by Martí, was dedicated to “the children of America.”

considered a Mexican Indian. He translated the book into Spanish and published it at his own expense. Most critics consider his translation far superior in style to the original novel.

Martí published two more books of poetry during his lifetime, *Versos libres* (Free Verses) and *Versos sencillos* (Simple Verses). The word “free” in the title of the first has two meanings. In one sense, it refers both to the form (which follows various rhyme schemes or none at all) and to the variety of the subject matter. The second meaning is the simple political freedom that Martí sought in all his writings and speeches. *Versos sencillos* was written in the Catskill mountains of New York State, where Martí had gone for health reasons and for a long-needed rest. The poems are very personal, reflecting Martí’s own experiences and feelings. It contains many of his best-known poems.

Martí was now so well-known throughout the Latin American world that he was offered a teaching post in Venezuela. On March 21, 1881, he left New York for Caracas, where he hoped to renew his efforts on behalf of Cuban independence. He founded a magazine, *La Revista Venezolana* (The Venezuelan Review), but it lasted for only two issues. As usual, Martí had offended the authorities by writing an article in praise of a



writer who was a political outcast in Venezuela. Martí thought it wise to return to New York. He continued to write articles for Venezuelan newspapers, but they were mostly articles on literary and artistic subjects.

During these early years in the United States, Martí was one of the busiest men in New York. He always wore black suits and a black tie, and he was a familiar figure as he dashed from newspaper offices to printers, to publishers, and to meetings and lectures. He reviewed books and plays and reported on public events, such as the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 and the dedication of the Statue of Liberty in 1886. He translated books from Spanish to English for the American publisher D. Appleton and Company, and he began to write in English for journals and newspapers. He also worked as a translator and assistant in the office of a prominent New York businessman. Perhaps the clerical and accounting skills he acquired as a boy working for his father helped him in this area. In 1883, he became the editor of a business magazine, *La América*, which showed that he was a practical man of affairs and not just a poet and revolutionary.

Martí wrote articles, essays, and newsletters for newspapers and journals in Argentina, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. He thus became the number one



interpreter of the United States for Latin America. In 1884, he was appointed vice-consul for Uruguay in New York. Later, he was appointed consul for Argentina and Paraguay. So the title of diplomat was added to his list of achievements.

At first, Martí was delighted with the United States. He was fascinated by a country "where everyone looks like his own master. One can breathe freely, freedom being here the foundation, the shield, the essence of life."<sup>6</sup> In his "Impressions of America," written for the magazine *Hour*, he wrote:

Here, one can be proud of the species. Everybody works. Everybody reads. . . . I feel obligated to this country, where the unprotected always find a friend. . . . Here, a good idea always finds welcoming, soft, and fertile ground. One must be intelligent, that is all. Do something useful, and you will have everything you want.<sup>7</sup>

Martí's early New York writings are filled with such praise. He was used to the world of Cuba and Spain, with its strict social classes, its domination by the church and state, its oppression of the lowly, and its resistance to new ideas and change. The United States for him was truly a land where the common people had "at last won Glory."<sup>8</sup>

Martí was especially impressed with American writers. In essay after essay, he provided his Spanish-speaking readers with accounts of the



lives and works of North America's greatest poets, novelists, and essayists of that time. In so doing, he played an important part in the cultural history of Latin America. Thanks to Martí's influence, future Latin American writers were to look to other countries and cultures in addition to Europe for their inspiration and example. Modern writers such as Gabriel García Márquez speak of the "North American masters" as their literary forebears.<sup>9</sup> If it had not been for Martí, Latin American writers might have followed the academic tradition of imitating European models that were quite different from the new societies of South and Central America.

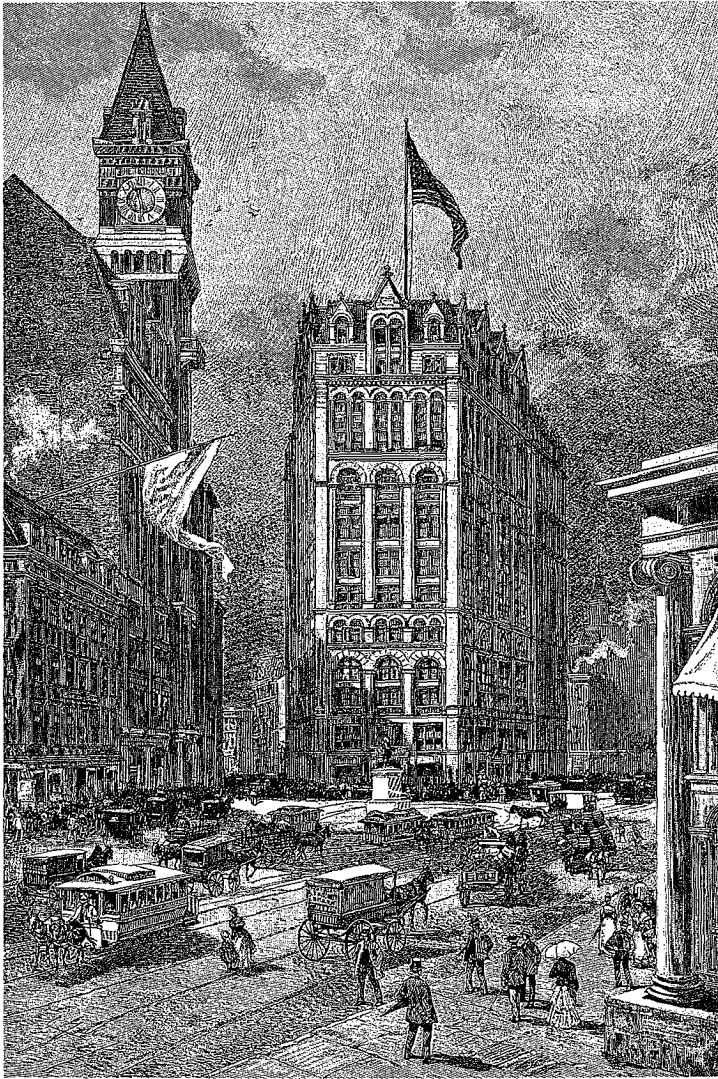
Martí introduced his readers to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Mark Twain, and Louisa May Alcott. He also discussed Edgar Allen Poe, James Russell Lowell, Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and many more. His essays were not just biographical sketches but in-depth discussions of his subjects' work. Martí's article on Ralph Waldo Emerson has been called one of the best essays ever written in Spanish and is a good example of Martí's scholarship and artistic opinions.<sup>10</sup> Martí was fascinated by Emerson and considered him a giant among writers. He admired the writer

both for his independent thought and for his belief that the poet was closer to truth than was the scientist or philosopher. In fact, he called Emerson "the Philosopher of Democracy."<sup>11</sup> Another of his favorites was Mark Twain. He described *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* as a "fight, cowboy style, with a lasso and gun"<sup>12</sup> against all the oppression and injustice in life.

He was also especially interested in Wendell Phillips and Henry Ward Beecher, whose lifelong battles against slavery were so much like Martí's struggles. As a poet, Martí was drawn to Walt Whitman, whom he considered a natural poet who scorned the formal manners and methods of traditional poets. In his own poetry, Martí was doing the same thing, introducing a new voice into the stilted and flowery language of traditional Spanish literature.

Martí's admiration for the United States began to wane, however, shortly after he began his "Impressions of America" series. He could not help noticing the great differences among the various New York social classes. On the one hand, there were the wealthy families of Fifth Avenue and upper Manhattan. On the other hand, there were the wretched poor of the Bowery and the Lower East Side. To Martí, this gap between the





This illustration from *Harper's Weekly* shows Printing House Square, just southeast of City Hall. In the center is *The New York Times* building, next to it is *The New York Herald*, and to the left of that *The New York Sun*, for which Martí wrote many articles.

haves and the have-nots seemed almost criminal in a nation as wealthy as the United States.

Martí reported and commented on the political scene in New York City for his Spanish-speaking readers. He soon became aware of the machine politicians, who were the true legislators of the city and state and even of the nation. He wrote that the whole system was built on bribery and corruption, a situation that was completely at odds with the democratic system he had so admired. He had thought that the Spanish colonial system was as corrupt as any could be, but the situation in New York seemed just as bad.

Martí had always admired the small farmers and working men of Cuba. He felt that all that was needed for their happiness and prosperity was popular democracy under an independent government. At first, he believed that this had been achieved in the United States. But, this was a period of rapid change in the United States. The nation was becoming completely industrialized, and the means of production of goods became more and more centered in a few large corporations. The small farmers and independent businessmen and manufacturers whom Martí credited with the industriousness and energy of the country were fast losing out to mammoth industrialists.



Martí also noted the tensions between the North and the South following the Civil War in America. The freed slaves, many of whom had traveled north to join an already large immigrant population, were angry that they were not being given the freedom and equality they had been promised. Thousands upon thousands of immigrants had poured into the United States to fill the needs of the new industrialized society. Martí saw them as motivated by greed rather than the need to partake of the freedom they had been denied in their native countries. This mixture of races and nationalities had produced an atmosphere of intolerance and bigotry, the one thing that Martí had most deplored in Cuba and Latin America.

Martí sensed that the United States, with all its power and energy, was embarking on a program of domination of the Western Hemisphere. Cuba was dependent upon the United States as the principal market for its most important export—sugar. After the Ten Years War, many North American companies had purchased sugar plantations and refineries from Cuban Criollos who had been bankrupted by the war. The presence and influence of the United States was increasing yearly in Cuba, and there was now renewed talk of Cuba becoming a state. Martí

believed that this would be a disaster for Cuba, and he warned his readers of it repeatedly in his writings. He also hoped that Cuba could learn from what was happening in the United States and avoid making the same mistakes. What he wanted was a completely independent Cuba, free to pursue its own destiny in harmony and peace.

Martí was later to write of his fears of domination of Cuba by the United States, "I have lived in the monster and I know its entrails."<sup>13</sup>

