

## 10 Asthma and its Symbolism

### The Respiratory Aesthetics of José Lezama Lima

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Cuban poet, essayist, and novelist José Lezama Lima (1910–1976) was a life-long sufferer of asthma. His interviews, essays, poems, letters, and diaries are interspersed with references to asthma and to the physical and mental trauma occasioned by respiratory crises. He also discusses in numerous texts the many curatives that he employed from childhood through to his final years – such as pine resin inhalers, epinephrine injections, herbal tinctures, and many varieties of fumigations. He describes how some of these medications would cause narcosis with attendant vivid dreams, nightmares waking visions, which in turn influenced his poetic aesthetic. Both the pathology of asthma and the hallucinatory effects of the treatments are depicted in great detail through the protagonist of his baroque masterpiece *Paradiso* (1966), José Cemí, whose attacks and recoveries are integrated into the poetic development of the novel. Indeed, the whole novel is replete with allusions to breath, breathing difficulties, and poetry as ‘pneuma universal’. Asthma thus becomes a symbol within Lezama’s writings in a similar manner that it did for Proust. In this chapter, I investigate the degree to which Lezama incorporated the visions caused by asthma crises and treatments within his ‘sistema poético’, and I appraise the symbolic resonance of asthma within the novel *Paradiso*.

*Paradiso* opens with the nocturnal asthma attack of the child José Cemí and follows his growth into an adolescence strongly affected by respiratory difficulties and crises.<sup>1</sup> There are lengthy narrative descriptions of Cemí’s attacks, and Cemí discusses with friends and family the nature of his condition, its impact upon his body and mind, and the effects of the medication. There are strong similarities between the fictional life of José Cemí and the biography of Lezama; indeed, the two lives are so similar that Lezama called *Paradiso* ‘a biographical novel’ (Lezama 2001: 133).<sup>2</sup> Amidst many parallels, both suffer from asthma, come from asthmatic families, are surrounded by figures who also suffer from asthma or respiratory difficulties, and have fathers who die from lung disease. In this respect, it is intriguing to correlate the descriptions of suffering and treatment in the novel alongside Lezama’s diaries and correspondence and to appraise the degree to which Lezama created an illness narrative in which through his *alter ego*, Cemí, he engaged with asthma, questioned it, analysed it, assimilated it, and assessed its impact upon his life.

Lezama considered the novel *Paradiso* to be the culmination of his life's work – the 'summa' of his 'poetic system of the world' (Lezama 2001: 133).<sup>3</sup> In this complex, baroque and kaleidoscopic poetic work Lezama repeatedly returned to the pathology of asthma and transformed it into a condition of being. Asthma is Cemí's lifelong foe and lifelong ally, a dark angel, the cause and result of his poetic sensibility. Asthma grants him a particular vision of reality, as his respiratory struggles bring him daily into contact with panic and the fear of death. Cemí is not simply someone who suffers asthma; he *embodies* asthma. His condition and his identity are inseparably interwoven. Asthma is his reality. Cemí is gradually empowered with the ability to make metaphor, to make connections, to perceive the world poetically; and therefore the act of making a symbol of his ailment is central to the development of his poetic vision. Lezama's whole complex poetic system cannot be dissociated from the daily struggles with breathing that the poet (Lezama/Cemí) suffered. Asthma becomes both a physiological affliction requiring medication and a poetic gift granting the sufferer a unique, poetic, experience of the world. *Paradiso* may be viewed as an asthmatic epistemology, an interactive space of healing where the author, narrator, protagonist, and reader meditate on the nature of suffering and healing and scrutinise the hazy borders that separate illness and wellness.

In some ways Lezama resembles one of the consumptive poets Susan Sontag considers in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), who 'metaphorise' tuberculosis and whose illness is also their muse. There are many features of Lezama's works whereby asthma grants the sufferer some curious poetic status, some cultural refinement, where, despite the trauma, the disease is as much gift as curse. In her analysis of Shelley, Keats, Stevenson, Mann, and others, Sontag identifies a similar process of describing the illness in language of connotation, metaphor, and symbol:

Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival.

(Sontag 1991: 60)

Underlying her analysis, however, is the assumption that this process of metaphorising may harm rather than heal. This is because to perceive illness symbolically, in her estimate, inevitably results in a perception that the illness is indexical to deficiencies in the sufferer, that the illness is characterological: 'Both the myth about TB and the current myth about cancer propose that one is responsible for one's disease' (Sontag 1991: 48). In the later work *AIDS and its metaphors* (1989), she explains that her opposition to the metaphorising of illness was informed by the diagnosis and treatment of her

own cancer in the late 1970s and was rooted in her disapproval of a continued stigmatisation of cancer as a curse, a punishment, or an embarrassment (Sontag 1991: 100). It is my aim to identify a strong process of metaphorisation in the work of Lezama, yet my approach departs from Sontag's insofar as it is also informed by the growing tradition, both scholarly and practical, of narrative healing and narrative medicine, where the ability to metaphorise and to tell and listen to the story of the illness is central to the healing process. Narratives about suffering are also narratives about healing, which are also narratives that may heal.

The term 'narrative medicine' has been explained by Rita Charon as 'medicine practiced with these narrative skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness', and she argues that an appreciation of the importance of the sufferer's story is central to the growth of 'a new frame for health care' (Charon 2006: 4). Arthur Frank, in *The Wounded Storyteller* (1997), urges us to recall that 'the body is not mute, but it is inarticulate; it does not use speech but it begets it' (Frank 1997: 27). As such, we should be alert to the subtle (or not so subtle) language of the suffering body and learn to hear the stories being told by ourselves and by others. Likewise, Lewis Mehl-Madrona (2007: 6) relates how the illness may be encouraged to contribute its own story towards the healing process. In this respect it becomes clear that Sontag's own book was a healing narrative, and she acknowledged this in her second essay by recounting that she found strength while writing the book: 'My aim was to alleviate unnecessary suffering' (Sontag 1991: 99)

In the poetic world of Lezama, and like the earlier authors' and poets' tubercular aesthetic in Sontag's study, Lezama creates potent philosophical and religious symbolic meaning of breath, breathing, and breathing difficulties. Whilst one will suffer, one will also be granted experiences and knowledge somehow unique and exquisite. Lezama suggests that illness yields both suffering and strength, granting aesthetic experiences and knowledge that may enrich the poet's creative experience. In this way strength may be derived from knowing the illness, understanding it, making an ally of it, *incorporating* it as a storytelling experience. In this chapter, I focus on the presentation of asthma in Lezama's works – especially *Paradiso* – paying particular attention to the asthma attacks, the varying opinions concerning causes and triggers, and the effects of medication and treatment. I consider the incorporation of asthma into a poetic mythology that shows Lezama engaging in a dialogue with asthma. In the poetic world of Lezama, 'the disease,' indeed, 'becomes adjectival.'

## ILLNESS AND CREATIVITY

Lezama writes that his first attack of asthma occurred soon after birth, 'asthma has been a hostile debility that has persecuted me since I was six

months old' (Lezama 2001: 127).<sup>4</sup> José Cemí, likewise, is introduced to the reader in the opening pages of the novel being comforted during an attack of asthma that leaves him terrified, exhausted, and covered in an aggressive rash. Baldovina (his maid and the literary avatar of Baldomera, Lezama's nurse/maid throughout his life) knows better than any the hold asthma has over the boy; she sees his panic and fear, senses the regular proximity of death, and knows how best to comfort him. The early years both of Lezama and Cemí present a figure helplessly harried by the malevolent presence of asthma. Asthma, however, is not only a cause of suffering, but it is closely interwoven with poetic sensibility and creativity both in *Paradiso* and in the autobiographical fragments of Lezama's letters, diaries, and poems. To begin with, we can discern that the illness and its attendant insomnia force the child to seek isolation and to read, write, and daydream. In this way the imagination of the child is awakened by the books to which he is granted access by the solitude and immobility of asthma; indeed, the visions that arise from the books and those from his fevered imagination become indistinguishable.

In the introduction to a selection of Lezama's works in English, Ernesto Livon Grossman writes that: 'Restricted by his acute asthma and his financial situation, Lezama was housebound for extended periods [...] and dedicated much of his youth to reading everything that came into his hands' (quoted in Lezama 2005: xiii). Manuel Pereira, a friend of the poet, writes that 'The Lezama I knew scarcely left his house because of his asthma and obesity' (quoted in Lezama 1998: 602).<sup>5</sup> Lezama himself remarks that he was grateful to his asthma as it allowed him to avoid obligatory sports at university 'I wanted to avoid sports, and so I exhumed my old asthma like a flag with which I could cover myself' (Lezama 2001: 128).<sup>6</sup> He likewise explains that it was something of a revelation to him as a child when he realised that he would sooner stay indoors reading Plato than join his friends in a ball game in the street: 'I remember a day in which my friends came to fetch me to play ball, and I said "No. I'm not going out today, I'm going to read." I had just begun Plato's *Symposium*, and from that day on reading has been my exercise, my most important obsession' (Lezama 2001: 129).<sup>7</sup>

There is something familiar about such a narrative, as we similarly read in numerous other artists and poets that their introduction to literature, poetry, and imagination were the result of some childhood condition that held them indoors and prevented them from roughhousing outside with the other children. Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, who also suffered from respiratory problems from childhood, writes in *Across the Plains* (1905: 154–155) that he would sit, struggling for air, for days and nights on end, and find solace in literature. It is also reflected in many of the examples cited by Sontag in her analysis of TB. Mark Jackson opens *Asthma: The Biography* (2009: 1–9) with an analysis of Marcel Proust who, like Lezama, was from childhood confined to isolation and solitude on account of his asthma, compelling him to plunge ever deeper into memory, imagination, reading, and

writing. He also cites Australian novelist Patrick White, for whom asthma served as a passport into a quiet rural life and abundant books (2009: 146).

In *Paradiso* Cemí habitually spends days away from his peers, isolated in his bedroom amidst heady fumigations. In this atmosphere he dwells with meditative contemplation on the images of the many and diverse texts he reads. He finds the uncommon physical and mental space to contemplate challenging authors like Suetonius and Goethe (in particular *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*), and he views subtle affinities between the mystical and poetic experiences depicted and his own states of consciousness. Lezama writes that asthma and insomnia were always for him bedfellows, and he describes how throughout his life he felt compelled to read and write as a means of overcoming the insomnia induced by asthmatic complications (2001: 151). Like Cemí he describes entering a state of 'alucinación' in which the unsleeping mind brings forth creatures, beings, and locations from the tales and adventures of the books: 'The exercise of reading was complemented by hallucination' (Lezama 2001: 129).<sup>8</sup> He also describes how the asthmatic insomnia would usher him to his writing desk to pursue the dream-like mode of perception in his literary creations: 'sometimes I work at midnight, when asthma prevents me sleeping, and in this way I enter a second night and I begin to watch my hands penetrating the breath of the word' (Lezama 2001: 151).<sup>9</sup> In this way we can intuit that the tumultuous and dreamlike episodes of *Paradiso* derive in large measure from nocturnal dialogues with asthma.

And yet such enforced isolation and penetration into the world of imagination, books, and dreams, whilst a refined gift, came not only with the burden of physical suffering but also with a sense of shame and weakness. The child senses that his illness is also *social*. Lezama describes how as a youngster he learned to hide the visible indications of asthma from his parents, his family, and his playmates, recognising that for his father there was some shame in the perceived feebleness of the boy: 'My father was proud of his children and presented us to all visitors; but I realised that it bothered him that they might notice that I suffered from asthma, and for that reason I tried to hide my attacks from others' (Lezama 2001: 127).<sup>10</sup> American journalist Tim Brookes, in his personal account of living with asthma, *Catching my Breath* (1994), recounts how as a child he would flout doctor's orders and not use his inhaler at school so as to conceal from his classmates his weakness. He dedicates a whole chapter to the adult tendency to mismanage medication and to lie to the doctor – often connected with deep-rooted shame of being ill. Brookes also writes that there is a long-held perception amongst the medical profession, asthmatics, and their families, that the illness is merely a childish phase: 'but this is simply the most common asthma myth, the belief that the asthmatic child will "grow out of it," as if the illness were a juvenile folly, like wetting the bed. This is wishful thinking on everyone's part – the doctor's, the patient's, the parent's' (Brookes 1994: 33).

In *Paradiso*, Cemí's father José Eugenio – a military man of high office – whilst loving and supporting of his son, nevertheless senses a weakness in the child. He exhibits the attitude that both Brookes (1994: 261) and Jackson (2009: 140) describe as being prevalent in the mid-twentieth century (and one that Sontag would have decried) of perceiving in his son an 'asthmatic personality type'. In his eyes, his son's physical frailty cannot be separated from his bookishness, fearfulness, and timidity, and as such José Eugenio sees the illness as both physical and psychological.<sup>11</sup> He suggests all manner of outlandish treatments including proposing that the child swallow a handful of salt so as to dry out his bronchioles. In order to encourage or compel the boy to depart from this childish infirmity, he proposes to Rialta, Cemí's mother, that the best cure would be to plunge the child in an icy bath, thereby shocking the system into robust health. Despite her remonstrations, he performs this act and nearly kills the boy and is subsequently unable to meet his wife's gaze as she hurries into the bathroom to sweep up the rigid and gasping child.

Both the father and the mother recognise that their son's character is in many respects derived from his illness at the same time that the illness is a consequence of his character. However, they differ in the means of approaching this matter, as José Eugenio perceives the asthma sapping the vitality and virility of his son, fashioning the boy into a sickly, weak, and, above all, fearful person. He also recognises that his son is subject to terrifying night visions; and yet his prosaic assessment is that the child should learn not to be afraid; that he should banish these visions and recognise them for what they are: illusions. Thus, he urges his son to fortify himself – the son of a soldier is not frightened of the dark. If the child can be made strong, stout, and hearty – physically and mentally – then his asthma will no longer be accommodated within him. José Eugenio thus makes a symbol of the asthma, viewing it as a dark demonic force that must be banished from the boy's system by the shock of icy water – a form of exorcism. Indeed, the narrator suggests that the father ordering his son to undress prior to the ice bath 'had something of an ancient sacrifice about it' (Lezama 2000: 131).<sup>12</sup> Brookes explores the vicious circle of asthma and panic; breathing difficulties create panic and vice versa: 'The harder the sufferer struggles to breathe, the less air she gets' (Brookes 1994: 264). Whilst José Eugenio may be accurate in perceiving a relationship between fear and asthma, it is clear to other characters of the novel, Rialta, Baldovina, José Cemí, and José Eugenio himself, that the physical and emotional trauma of being plunged into icy water exacerbated rather than eased the panic-asthma cycle.

Rialta, on the other hand, is able to perceive her son's asthma in a more gentle and compassionate way. She suggests in a beautiful speech that asthma is a gift from the divine, that the nocturnal terrors of the child incite his imagination, his visionary capacity, and his poetic sensibility, and grant him privileged knowledge of the world of the dead. Furthermore, through suffering asthma, he is fortified by its divine presence from all other illnesses:

‘They say a person with that sickness has a protection the way the jiqui plant has against lightning’ (Lezama 2000: 131).<sup>13</sup> She calmly concludes that he will be cured only by learning to be present and engaged in such a visionary realm, to deal with the monstrous visions on their terms, to allow the spirit of asthma – the story of asthma – to unfold. In this respect, Rialta can be seen to demonstrate a sense of healing described by Mehl-Madrona as ‘narrative medicine’:

Asthma can be conceptualized as one thread that runs through a life, just as multiple themes may run through a novel. Asthma wants to be recognized, for it is not just a theme. It is also a character. It has a life. It has its own story. It has its own spirit. Small miracles can occur when it is recognized. It rejoices when recognized. Asthma is a kind of person who wants to be encountered. This is not the daily fare of physicians, who work with signs and symptoms, much as historians work with documents. In the context of both medicine and history, the voices behind the signs, symptoms, and documents are silent.

(Mehl-Madrona 2007: 185)

Rialta sees asthma as more than merely a physical disability. She understands that strength and knowledge may be drawn from it, and in this respect, she understands that only by allowing asthma to tell its own story will her child be able to draw any of its strength. Over the course of the novel, Rialta demonstrates a compassionate and wise understanding of the nature of Cemí’s illness.

#### MEDICATION AND ITS EFFECTS

It is not just the enforced isolation and the extended time with insomnia and books that awaken the child’s imagination; it is also the narcotic effects of the medicines themselves. Reminiscing on his childhood, Lezama acknowledges that there was magic to these moments of asthmatic crisis, that he would enter a meditative, poetic, state caused not only by the trauma of asthma but in particular by the effects of the medication:

During my childhood there were scarcely any medicines for asthma. I spent a large part of my childhood taking *tolú* and *brea* syrups, and many years later I tried some powders called *Abisinia Exibar*, which provided relief and, above all, created an atmosphere that reminded me of the *Thousand and One Nights* ... I felt myself surrounded by a dust of slow sparks from which strange divinities could emerge. In the midst of all this I would fall asleep.

(Lezama 2001: 127–128)<sup>14</sup>

Lezama expresses that as a child his imagination was greatly enhanced by these episodes and these balsams and vaporised powders, especially the traditional South American herbal remedy, tolu resin. In *Paradiso*, Cemí regularly hovers at the hypnogogic world of ‘duermevela’, where the room around him stirs with fantastical beings and things take on new and strange significance, a state of consciousness caused by both the asthmatic crisis and the medication. The women in his family all understand the healing capacity of dreams, visions, and imagination and that the medications are thus efficacious because they cause drowsiness, allowing the relaxation of the agitated and traumatised boy, and granting him access to this visionary realm from which he derives strength. There are numerous instances throughout the novel where Cemí enters a narcotic slumber induced by the dense fumigations in his room. The windows and doors are shut, the lights dimmed, and the vapours surround him. This creates an atmosphere at once conducive to the slumberous effects of the vapours themselves, and thus – to borrow a phrase from psychedelic counter-culture of the 1960s – set and setting are appropriately established to provoke the visionary state of consciousness. In particular, Cemí feels great peace in such states, recognising that the landscape of dreams not only lessens the pain and panic of the asthma crisis but provides a rich and inviting relationship with reality; it is this state of consciousness that Lezama was so adept at capturing with his ecstatic poetic language. There are many instances throughout the novel where the narrative spirals off in poetic abandon in describing Cemí’s intoxicated visionary state.

Lezama’s sister, Eloísa, pays close attention to the many descriptions of asthma crises and treatments as derived entirely from the author’s own experiences. As a footnote to a description of Cemí’s fume-filled room, she explains: ‘This is how Lezama would cure his asthmatic breathlessness’ (quoted in Lezama 1980: 381).<sup>15</sup> We can also see that whilst Baldovina provides for Cemí during one of his many nocturnal crises ‘a spoonful of tolu and resin syrup, the heat of which relaxed his bronchial tubes, dilating them, and letting the air of good sleep pass through the loopholes’ (Lezama 2000: 143),<sup>16</sup> we saw above that Lezama took the very same remedies. This indicates further that Lezama depicted in the novel the treatments that he was given as a child, and we may therefore assume that Cemí, like Lezama, was administered the exotic-sounding *Abisinia Exibar*. Would it have had narcotic effects? Jackson’s biography of asthma relates the wide variety of treatments and medications offered to asthma sufferers over the centuries, from the ancient Greeks through to the twenty-first century. Focusing initially on Proust, Jackson reports that many of the remedies offered in France during the novelist’s lifetime remained popular until the mid-1950s, when fresh medical attention began to focus more on specific physical pathogens:

Proust experimented with a wide variety of treatments in an attempt to alleviate or cure his asthma. While living at home before his parents



died, he would retreat to a designated smoking room, in which he smoked medicated cigarettes or burned and inhaled Espic, Legras, or Escouflaire powders, all of which contained stramonium, an ancient remedy derived from thorn apple or jimson weed; his letters are replete with references to regular ‘fumigations’ and these patent remedies and other substances, such as carbolic acid. In addition, he was prescribed morphine, opium, caffeine, and iodine.

(Jackson 2009: 5)

Whilst Jackson lists here a number of psychoactive ingredients, it is stramonium that particularly concerns him, and he dedicates an article to this botanical compound in the journal *Medical History*:

A surgeon in Hackney turned for relief to the common thorn-apple, *Datura stramonium*, which was also a member of the solanaceae family of plants that included henbane, deadly nightshade, and mandrake and which appeared to have similar anti-spasmodic properties. Although the leaves and seeds of the thorn-apple were known to have dangerous narcotic effects, leading to its being referred to as ‘the Devil’s Apple’ or one of the ‘witches’ weeds’, patient testimonies suggested that preparations of the stalks and roots were effective in relieving asthmatic paroxysms.

(Jackson 2010: 179)

Based upon Jackson’s accounts, it is possible that *Abisinia Exibar* contained stramonium, and thus it is likely that Lezama and Cemí did enter into narcotic slumbers on account of this remedy. Cintio Vitier, close friend of Lezama and editor of the Archivos edition of *Paradiso* (1988), writes that ‘the French medicine *Polvos abisinios* consisted of anti-asthmatic granules for burning inside a room, which produced a thick smoke which relieved or totally cured an asthmatic crisis’ (quoted in Lezama 1988: 488),<sup>17</sup> and he explains that Lezama was forced to seek other remedies when this French medicine was no longer available. Further research revealed that the exotic, oriental-sounding name *Exibar* – which so contributed to Lezama’s raptures – was in fact the name of the French chemist who developed the combustible powders at the end of the nineteenth century, one François Amédée Exibard, who developed cigarettes for easing respiratory congestion (Raynal 2007: 20).<sup>18</sup>

Just as Jackson discusses Proust as an invaluable source of information about the pathology and treatment of asthma in *fin-de-siècle* France, so we can appraise Lezama’s works for the information about asthma and its treatment in mid-twentieth-century Cuba. In addition to the pine resins, stramonium, and other ‘recipes, potions, herbals’ (Lezama 2000: 128)<sup>19</sup> provided for Cemí, the various family members offer a dazzling array of opinions about the cause and remedies of asthma. As we have seen, José Eugenio sees the asthma as the result of the boy’s weak and sickly nature and suggests

physical shocks to strengthen him. José Eugenio is motivated by his genuine concern that certain medications administered to the child cause him physical harm: ‘and then they go back to their tolu balsam and resin, and those iodides, and that’s how he gets those stains on his face that make him look dirty even when he’s just come out of the tub. And the iodide loosens his teeth, weakens him, because however much it may help his asthma, it’s bad for his growth’ (Lezama 2000: 130).<sup>20</sup> It is likely that José Eugenio is referring to potassium iodide, which, Jackson informs us, was regularly included in asthma medicines from the nineteenth century onwards:

In most cases, commercial nostrums and powders incorporated a variety of familiar ingredients, including stramonium, lobelia, potassium nitrate, potassium iodide, and caffeine. Manufactured and distributed both in America and Europe, ‘Felsol’, for example, contained phenazone, anilopyrine, jodopyrine, caffeine, and lobelia. According to publicity material, ‘Felsol’ was not only effective in chronic bronchitis but was also considerably superior to adrenaline in the treatment of asthma. Similarly, chemical analysis of Kellogg’s Asthma Powder revealed that it contained stramonium and potassium nitrate. The enduring popularity of these patent remedies, as well as growing interest in the psychological causes of asthma, suggests that, in spite of considerable advances in physiology and pharmacology, many asthmatics were still struggling to breathe.

(Jackson 2009: 139)

Cemí’s grandmother is also asthmatic, and the vivid description of an attack in the novel prompts a biographical footnote by Lezama’s sister: ‘symptomology of the author’s asthma’ (Lezama 1980: 243).<sup>21</sup> She blithely ascribes all asthma to a refined family inheritance and recommends as a cure placing a seahorse beside a statue of the Virgen de la Caridad (Virgin of Charity) and offering prayers, whilst Cemí’s aunt suggests horse riding in the countryside to alleviate the boy’s asthma. Rialta recognises that trauma and excitement affect her son’s asthma, and Cemí himself acknowledges that he is particularly vulnerable to asthma attacks when tense or agitated or separated from his family. Cemí also suggests that he has been recommended soup made from buzzard chicks, which made him nauseous. It is also interesting to note that in Lezama’s unfinished posthumously published novel *Oppiano Licario* (a continuation of *Paradiso*), Licario’s sister, Ynaca, performs a ritual involving Zoroastrian spells and Christian prayers whilst offering Cemí *cabalonga* seeds to alleviate his asthma. She explains to him the toxicity of these seeds, and the correct way of preparing them, and perhaps, owing to the shamanic role she plays, she is aware of the seeds’ hallucinogenic properties (1989: 154).<sup>22</sup>

Lezama describes the locations that provoked his asthma during his childhood: ‘When my father was in La Cabaña, the damp atmosphere of

that fortress turned my asthma into bronchitis. My father later went to Kansas City, a very cold place, and there my illness became worse. Fine during the day, but at night I suffered incessant breathlessness' (Lezama 2001: 127).<sup>23</sup> He also describes how some medicines were more effective than others. Here we enter a fascinating historical episode, as from the early 1960s Lezama's correspondence becomes fraught with appeals to friends and family abroad (such as Eloísa in Florida or the Argentine writer Julio Cortázar in France) to send or bring him specific medicines. Scarcely one letter to his sister, for example, fails to describe the vicissitudes of his asthma and to request 'Dyspné Inhal':

I live in constant fear that every day will be worse owing to the lack of Dyspné Inhal. Unfortunately, that which they make there is of no use to me, it is no good, it is an unusable imitation of the French medicine, and that which they make here only imitates the imitation, and not only is no good to me, but causes me harm. I need the following medicines: Himrod (fumigation powders), Celestone (pills), Ilosone (pills), Raudixin (pills).

(Lezama 1998: 137)<sup>24</sup>

Jackson writes that '*Himrod's Cure for Asthma*,' in addition to other medications, 'contained stramonium either alone or in conjunction with tobacco, lobelia, potash, and sometimes arsenic [and] were aggressively promoted in the medical and popular press and sold over the counter in most western countries' (Jackson 2010: 184). It is therefore possible that Lezama still sought relief from his asthma in his later years with stramonium-based medications. A search in medical dictionaries reveals that the other three products Lezama requests are still prescribed for asthma today. A similar search reveals that Dyspné Inhal was a French medicine made by Augot Laboratoires consisting effectively of epinephrine (adrenaline). As a neurotransmitter, ingested or endogenous, epinephrine is well known for its psychoactive affects (see Weill and Rosen 2004: 38–9).

One botanical product that should not be overlooked in relationship to asthma is tobacco. Lezama was a heavy cigar smoker, and tobacco permeates *Paradiso* to the extent that fellow Cuban author Guillermo Cabrera Infante discusses the novel in his literary and cinematographic history of tobacco *Holy Smoke* (1985). The dense fumes of tobacco, which swirl around Cemí, his friends, and family, contribute to the nebulous and opaque atmosphere of the novel and the poetic state of consciousness that the reader is compelled to adopt in order to pursue the complex and image-filled prose. Whilst tobacco is not discussed in relation to asthma, it is striking to note that Cemí, as an adolescent, learns to enhance his poetic meditations with the assistance of tobacco. An extensive episode of the novel shows him in his bedroom smoking cigarette after cigarette whilst entering a hallucinatory trance in which he ecstatically contemplates the nature of metaphor (Lezama 1968: 376–377;

2000: 355–356). This occurs soon after an asthmatic crisis, and he appears to achieve notable tranquillity in this tobacco-filled environment. He even sends Baldovina, who regularly administers his asthma medication, to buy him five packets of cigarettes. Although Lezama describes the cigarette-induced wheezy and rickety laugh of one character and depicts Cemí's other uncle fainting as an adolescent from too many cigarettes, it is quite possible that the full damaging effects of tobacco, and especially its exacerbating effects upon asthma, were not fully known by Lezama or his peers in 1950s and 1960s Cuba. Jackson writes that not only was tobacco little understood as a health hazard in the early and mid-twentieth-century, it and other combustible plants were often promoted as asthma remedies (2010: 173). An illustration from Jackson's asthma biography shows a magazine advert from the US from 1959 promoting stramonium cigarettes, bearing the legend: 'As Reported in the British Medical Journal August 15 1959' and 'helpful for asthma' (Jackson 2009: 132). It is likely that such a product would have been available to Cubans in the 1950s, and therefore we may conclude that Lezama was recommended medicinal cigarettes.

The works of Lezama thus constitute a treasury of information about the pathology of asthma, its triggers, causes, treatments, and cures. Brookes relates that the sufferer of a chronic illness necessarily becomes his/her own best authority on the illness and learns better than any other the best preventative and curative techniques (Brookes 1994: 266). It is striking to note, therefore, the absence of professional medical attention in Lezama's diaries and correspondence and in the novel *Paradiso*. It seems that in his earlier decades, Lezama experimented with many different types of medicines and treatments, as reflected in the panoply of treatments employed by Cemí or recommended to him in *Paradiso*, and that from the 1960s until his death in 1976, Lezama made use of whatever drug was available to him either in Cuba or from abroad. It is also striking how deep was his knowledge-base of such treatments, as he describes medicines based on pine resin, stramonium, potassium iodide, tolu resin, tobacco, and epinephrine. One might also suggest that he had access to ethnobotanical and medical literature, as the particularities of cabalonga seeds (*thevetia peruviana*) were unknown in botanical scholarship until the pioneering work of Richard Evans Schultes in the late 1960s (see De Feo 1992). Lezama similarly discusses the intricate medical properties of 'The yellow *caguairán* [...] a good plant for asthma. I don't know if it is the same tree as the *cajuaní* or *jocuma*. It could be *guajaní*, a tree whose leaves are also good for asthma' (Lezama 1988: 196).<sup>25</sup> Such detail demonstrates more than mere passing attention.

What is significant is that by describing such a variety of often contradictory opinions about asthma, Lezama demonstrates the ongoing mystery that surrounds the illness. 'All asthma pharmaceuticals', writes Brookes, 'suffer from the problem that you can't make a useful medication for a disease you don't understand' (Brookes 1994: 36). Jackson, likewise, explains that a key issue in the treatment of asthma is ascertaining exactly what it is:

'It is noticeable that, as scientific knowledge of the aetiology and pathogenesis of asthma deepened, the definition of the condition became less stable' (Jackson 2009: 156).

### BREATH, BREATHING, AND 'PNEUMA UNIVERSAL'

We have seen, therefore, that asthma is a dominant feature both of Lezama's life and of his work *Paradiso* (it also figures extensively in his poetry, but space prevents wider exploration here). The various characters in the novel make a metaphor of the illness and perceive it in a manner beyond simply a physiological condition. Thus, José Eugenio sees asthma as a malevolent presence, enfeebling his son and preventing his natural growth to manhood. Rialta sees asthma as a divine protection, a gift that will allow her son acquaintance with the world of death, the world of spirits, and the wider realms of the imagination. Cemí, meanwhile, perceives his asthma as 'his hostile deity' (Lezama 2000: 147),<sup>26</sup> like a monstrous fly weighing down his chest, suffocating him and feeding on his vital energy and only dispelled by the administrations of Baldovina. There are many threads that wind through *Paradiso* as they wind through the other poetic works of Lezama. One such symbolic thread is that of breath and breathing. Lezama repeated in interviews, diaries, letters, and conversations that 'La poesía es un *pneuma* universal' (Lezama 2001: 156), suggesting that the fabric of reality is governed by the rhythm of breath: 'inspiration and exhalation, which are a universal rhythm' (Lezama 1970: 439).<sup>27</sup> Lezama explained that whilst for many people breathing is an unconscious, unnoticed activity, for him it is an ever-present act of will. This in turn grants him a particularly intense state of perception of the world around him:

My body has assimilated a chronic asthma, that's to say, the normal rhythm of breathing is for me alarmed, subdivided, irregular. This means that every instant for me is vivid. I sleep very little. Ecstasy, surprise, run through and take possession of my body [...] When I sense that delicious feeling of long, slow, breath, everything is frozen with the contraction and dilation of universal rhythm.

(Lezama 1988: 728)<sup>28</sup>

In this remarkable utterance, it becomes clear that there is a direct correlation between the precariousness of his breath and an ecstatic state of consciousness, as if the daily struggle for breath were a constant reminder that breath can cease at any moment. Here one may find affinity with the attention to breath *pranayama* as practiced in traditions of yoga, in which concentration is focused on the breath as the ebb and flow of 'vital air', spirit and energy. Lezama was an observant reader of Vedic and Buddhist literature, in addition to his encyclopaedic knowledge of western religious

traditions, and thus one might find parallels with his concern for eastern traditions of mindfulness of breath and breathing and the gnostic concepts of *psyche* (soul) and *pneuma* (spirit). Attention to breath was for Lezama a habitual aspect of his being. Furthermore, the yogic focus upon the breath leads to a heightened state of awareness and a greater power of concentration. In this respect we can understand that in addition to the effects of the medication, Lezama was regularly induced into an altered state of consciousness by the habitual struggle with and attention to the elemental activity of breathing. In *Paradiso*, there are numerous passages that testify to Cemí's heightened state of awareness brought about by asthma. In particular, Cemí is depicted as experiencing regular raptures and 'alucinaciones' following asthma crises. Cemí's friend Foción astutely understands, like Rialta, that Cemí's asthma grants him certain ecstatic states of consciousness: 'He has asthma, his abnormal intake of air keeps him tense, on guard, and tends to place him altogether on Jacob's ladder, between heaven and earth, like the demigods' (Lezama 2000: 290).<sup>29</sup> This description is similar to the way Rialta describes the divine gift of asthma and its capacity to grant Cemí access to otherworld realities. In this respect one may see a shamanic capacity in Cemí, in that uncommon modes of perception are available to him in which imagination and perception become closely inter-related. The narrator also pays attention to this, suggesting that through ecstasy Cemí was able to transcend the formal limits of time (Lezama 1968: 349; 2000: 327). Furthermore, Cemí is granted moments of sublime calm following asthma crises in which time radically slows, and he is able to dwell with rapt concentration on the domestic and quotidian activities surrounding him.

These passages concerning Cemí may be married with Lezama's many descriptions of his own status as 'peregrino inmóvil': a traveller to remote areas of world history whilst never leaving his small apartment in Havana. 'I have recourse to a fabulous imagination. Just by closing my eyes while I rub the magic lamp, I can relive the court of Louis XIV and stand next to the Sun King, hear mass in Zamora Cathedral with Columbus' (Lezama 2001: 170).<sup>30</sup> Lezama repeatedly depicts a close correlation between his prodigious imagination and the complications of breathing.

At this stage, therefore, we approach the question of the healing narrative. Cemí is a university student at the end of *Paradiso*, and over the trajectory of these twenty-odd years, the novel displays his evolving relationship with asthma. At the outset his frail infant form is at the mercy of this dark force over which he has no control. Yet whilst José Eugenio desperately desires that his son grow out of the illness, it becomes clear that over the years he grows *with* it, even *into* it. Brookes writes about 'the paradox of chronic illness: the patient grows around the disease, like an oak tree engulfing a barbed-wire fence' (Brookes 1994: 7). Through his own animated state of perception, and with the merciful influence of his mother and Baldovina, Cemí learns to accommodate the illness and to derive from it strength and

knowledge. Whether considering asthma a divine gift, a protective blessing, a daemonic ally, or a gatekeeper to alternative realities, Cemí learns to approach asthma not as pathology but as symbol. Lezama, likewise, engages in a dialogue of six decades with asthma, converting it from a malevolent foe into a powerful ally – an ally who grants him powers of perception, imagination, and knowledge. Whilst, as discussed, numerous interviews, letters, and other texts testify to this dialogue with asthma, there is one interview in which Lezama makes explicit this intricate relationship:

The doctor has told me that asthma comes from a *hongus focus*, a mould that lives in the air. I, on the other hand, live like a suicide; I submerge myself in death, and when I wake, I surrender myself to the pleasures of resurrection. My asthma arrives in waves:

first, it disappears beneath the sea, then it appears in the great aquarium where fish savour the world. I am also like a fish: with the lack of bronchioles I breathe through gills. It comforts me to think of the infinite brotherhood of great asthmatics who precede me. Seneca was the first. Proust, who is one of the last, would die three times every night before presenting himself to the delights of the day every morning. I myself am asthma, because to the breathlessness of the illness I have added the breathlessness of immobility.

(Lezama 1995: 30)<sup>31</sup>

Just as Borges felt kinship with Homer, Milton, and Joyce through their shared blindness (as Novillo-Corvalán shows in the Introduction to this volume), so asthma granted Lezama membership of a noble lineage including Seneca and Proust; and as with Borges, the physical restrictions of the condition are translated into gifts of vision, imagination, and memory. Furthermore, he recognises that asthma is the cause of his immobility, and thus the best resistance to asthma is to channel – rather than lament – the limitations that it sets and to travel instead in his imagination. The result is his art and poetry. He encourages asthma to tell its own story and to make itself heard, and in this respect, one can argue that by making a metaphor, Lezama also makes a symbolic character who may be met in dialogue, who may be understood. The dialogue occurs in *Paradiso*, and in this respect the novel is an account of healing. But who is healed?

Susan Sontag, following the tradition pioneered by Roland Barthes in his essays *Mythologies* (1957), strove to reveal the implicit semiological structures that had been erected around illness, in particular cancer. She was determined to reveal the military metaphors and the language of war that served to terrify and disempower the cancer sufferer. Whilst in *Illness as Metaphor* she was critical of all metaphorical approaches to illness, she tempered her former strident stance in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* and recognised that ‘one cannot think without metaphors’, while at the same time clarifying that ‘that does not mean there aren’t some metaphors we

might well abstain from or try to retire' (Sontag 1991: 91). The question is not whether the narrative is told or not – it is what the narrative is and how it is told; as Mehl-Madrona writes, 'telling people they are going to die is as good as killing them' (Mehl-Madrona 2007: 16). Sontag found herself surrounded by narratives of death, of hushed whispers and embarrassed euphemism, and she reacted to punitive, moralistic, and stigmatising notions of cancer. This is the type of metaphorical language that, she suggests, can kill rather than heal. Arthur Frank describes how 'illness often precipitates a condition of lacking desire' (Frank 1997: 38). Sontag reports the same loss of desire. *Paradiso*, however, is a mighty celebration of desire, contraposing in a complex web of symbols forces of growth and generation against forces of limitation and destruction. Such scenarios are played out again and again, and Cemí learns to choose the poetic path of *eros*, *poesis*, and creation and to resist that path that he understands from his reading of Suetonius as 'Neronian'.

Cemí is a character depicted with a physical ailment that wracks his small body and leaves him terrified and gasping for breath. He senses the presence of death because he feels the threat upon his very breath. Yet he brims with desire – erotic, poetic, aesthetic. He learns to be alert to the approach of asthma, to prepare for it, seek the strength that it brings, and welcome it. His desire to be alive, to learn, grow, and savour the world around him is contingent upon his desire to breathe – to *stay* alive. As Brookes acknowledges, a chronic asthmatic will never know if the next attack will really carry him off. I would argue that the poetic and symbolic language employed by Lezama is one of empowerment; it is a declaration not of illness but of wellness.

## NOTES

1. All translations of the novel are from the Dalkey Archive edition (2000), translated by Gregory Rabassa.
2. 'una novela autobiográfica'.
3. 'sistema poético del mundo'.
4. 'El asma ha sido una debilidad hostil que me ha perseguido desde los seis meses de nacido'.
5. 'El Lezama que yo conocí apenas salía de su casa a causa del asma y la obesidad'.
6. 'Yo quise evitar hacerlos y exhumé mi vieja asma como bandera bajo la cual me podía cobijar'.
7. 'Recuerdo un día en que los amigos del barrio vinieron a buscarme para jugar pelota, y yo les dije: "No, hoy no salgo, me voy a quedar leyendo." Había comenzado a leer *El Banquete* de Platón, y desde ese día la lectura fue mi ejercicio, mi fanatismo más importante'.
8. 'el ejercicio de la lectura fue complementado por la alucinación'. The Spanish word 'alucinación' is not strictly hallucination, as it also denotes wonder, fascination and awe.



9. 'a veces trabajo en la medianoche cuando el asma no me deja dormir y entonces decido irme a una segunda noche y empiezo a verme las manos penetrando en el hálito de la palabra'.
10. 'Mi padre tenía el orgullo de sus dos pequeños hijos y a todas las visitas nos mostraba; pero me daba cuenta de que le molestaba que se percataran de que yo era asmático, por eso yo procuraba ocultar mis crisis delante de los demás'.
11. Interestingly, Jackson pays attention to one of Proust's letters where he describes *his* father as suggesting that the asthma was merely a state of mind: "By the way, as they wanted to bring me back in the car, Constantin said it was all in my imagination that cold air was bad for me, because Papa told everyone that there was nothing wrong with me and that my asthma was purely imaginary. I know only too well when I wake here in the morning that it is very real" (Jackson 2009: 5).
12. 'tenía algo de los antiguos sacrificios' (Lezama 1968: 142).
13. 'Todos dicen que el que tiene esa enfermedad está protegido como el jiquí contra el rayo. Que es una enfermedad protectora como una divinidad' (Lezama 1968: 141).
14. 'Durante mi infancia apenas había medicamentos contra el asma. Pasé gran parte de mi niñez tomando jarabe de tolúa y brea, y muchos años más tarde probé unos polvos que se llamaban *Abisinia Exibar* que me hacían la enfermedad más llevadera y sobre todo, me comunicaban una atmósfera oriental que me recordaba un poco a *Las mil y una noches* ... Me veía rodeado de un polvo de lentos chisporroteos de donde podían surgir extrañas divinidades. En medio de eso me quedaba dormido'.
15. 'Así se curaba la disnea asmática de Jose Lezama'.
16. 'una cucharita de jarabe de tolú y brea, cuyo calor licuaba el erizo bronquial, haciéndolo dilatarse y pasando ya por sus aspilleras el aire del buen sueño' (Lezama 1968: 155).
17. 'La medicina llamada *Polvos abisinios* (en francés) consistía en unos gránulos antiasmáticos que, al ser quemados dentro de la habitación cerrada, producían un humo espeso cuya aspiración aliviaba o disipaba totalmente las crisis de asma'.
18. Curiously, the Argentine poet Nestor Perlongher (1949–1992) entitled one of his poems 'Abisina Exibar' in recognition of 'la marca de polvos usada por Lezama' (1987: 69) ('the powders used by Lezama').
19. 'recetas, pócimas, y yerbajos' (Lezama 1968: 139).
20. 'y vuelven otra vez al jarabe de tolú y brea, y a los yoduros, y así le salen esas manchas en la cara, que parece que está sucio aunque haya salido del baño. Y el yoduro le aflojará los dientes, lo debilitará, pues se ve que es una medicina que si lo mejora del asma, le hará daño para su crecimiento' (Lezama 1968: 141).
21. 'Sintomatología del asma del autor'.
22. De Feo 1992: 437 examines the hallucinogenic properties of this plant. [www.erowid.org](http://www.erowid.org) lists plant-based analogues to traditional ayahuasca brews, including *cabalonga blanca*. These are the seeds of the *Thevetia peruvianus* plant and are highly toxic, yet have extensive use in Amerindian rituals.
23. 'Cuando mi padre estuvo en La Cabaña, el ambiente húmedo de aquella fortaleza me convirtió en asma la bronquitis incipiente. Después mi padre pasó a Kansas City, un lugar muy frío, y allí mi enfermedad se agravó. Los días los pasaba bastante bien; pero las noches transcurrían con incesantes disneas'.
24. 'Vivo en constante inquietud, que cada día se hace más terrible, la de la falta de Dyspné Inhal. Desgraciadamente para mí el que hacen ahí no me sirve, no

- es bueno, es una inservible imitación del francés y el que hacen aquí ‘imita la imitación’, y no sólo no sirve, sino que hace daño. Me hacen falta las siguientes medicinas: Himrod (polvos fumigatorios), Celestone (pastillas), Ilosone (pastillas), Raudixin (pastillas). Mándamelas con urgencia’.
25. ‘El caguairán amarillo es una planta buena para el asma. Ignoro si es el mismo árbol que el cajuani o jocuma. Puede ser guajani, árbol cuya hoja es también buena para el asma’.
  26. ‘su enemiga divinidad’ (Lezama 1968: 159).
  27. ‘inspiración y espiración que son un ritmo universal’.
  28. ‘Mi organismo ha asimilado un asma crónica, es decir, la respiración que es un ritmo normal, en mí es sobresaltada, subdividida, irregular. Eso motiva que en mí cada instante esté muy avivado, duermo poco [...]. El éxtasis, el asombro recorren mi cuerpo ocupándolo en su totalidad [...] Cuando mis sentidos tienen una sensación hermosa de longitud de onda respirante, se paralizan con la contracción y dilatación del ritmo universal’.
  29. ‘Cemí es asmático, su incorporación anormal del aire lo mantiene siempre tenso, como en sobreaviso, tiende a colocarlo todo en la escala de Jacob, entre cielo y tierra como los semidioses’ (Lezama 1968: 310).
  30. ‘tengo el recurso de una imaginación fabulosa. Con sólo cerrar los ojos mientras froto la lámpara mágica, puedo revivir la corte de Luis XIV y situarme al lado del Rey Sol, oír misa de domingo en la catedral de Zamora junto a Colón’.
  31. ‘El médico me ha dicho que [el asma] se debe a un *hongus focus*, un hongo que vive en el aire. Yo, en cambio, vivo como los suicidas, me sumerjo en la muerte y al despertar me entrego a los placeres de la resurrección. Mi asma llega hasta mí en dos ondas: primero, desaparece por debajo del mar, y luego arriba al gran acuario donde todos los peces saborean el mundo. Yo también soy como un peje: a falta de bronquios, respiro con mis branquias. Me consuela pensar en la infinita cofradía de grandes asmáticos que me ha precedido. Séneca fue el primero. Proust, que es de los últimos, moría tres veces cada noche para entregarse en las mañanas al disfrute de la vida. Yo mismo soy el asma, porque a la disnea de la enfermedad he sumado también la disnea de la inmovilidad.’

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