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Preface

MY PURPOSE IN writing this book has not been to provide an introduction to the work of José Lezama Lima. Such introductory works have been available now for some years. I believe that the criticism on Lezama has reached a point where we can begin to examine his works in the context not only of Hispanic literature but of world literature and current literary theory.

Although Lezama's production as a poet was vast and important, he himself repeatedly stated that the novel *Paradiso* was the *summa* of his poetry. Taking up his paradoxical challenge, I have chosen to study his poetics primarily through his acknowledged prose masterpiece. The extra-generic terrain of this poem-novel is to my mind the best place to illustrate Lezama's poetic brinksmanship. Concentrating on his major prose works—Paradiso, Oppiano Licario, and his essays—I have sought to explain Lezama's theory and practice of literature. Throughout the book I have been fascinated by the stimulating difficulties that Lezama's work presents. I have sought to highlight and preserve rather than resolve the essential and persistent contradictions in his writings: the mystical quest for illumination through obscurity, his calculated cultivation of naïveté, his cosmopolitan Americanism, his Proust-like fascination with and ultimate condemnation of homosexuality, his modernist (in some aspects even postmodernist) narrative style coupled with a mystical (and essentially medieval) worldview. Above all, I have wanted to share my wonder at Lezama, true "monstruo de su laberinto," who in an age of pessimism maintained his joyful vision.

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