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Adam Glover

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Crisis and Exile: On José María Heredia's Romanticism

Adam Glover

Cuban poet José María Heredia's life—1803-1839—had all the trappings of unsolicited Romantic heroism. Exiled from Cuba in 1823 for alleged participation in a revolutionary plot against the Spanish colonial government, Heredia spent the rest of his life roaming through the United States and Mexico battling infirmity, isolation, and financial destitution. But while Heredia's poetry, together with his premature death at age 35, made him an icon of an entire generation of Latin American literati and the primogenitor of a long line of Cuban poet-martyrs (Luciani), one suspects that he might have traded it all for the opportunity to return to the island. Indeed, although Heredia returned to Cuba for a brief visit in late 1836 and early 1837, much of his poetry can be read as an extended expression of nostalgia for the lost homeland (Chacón y Calvo 115).

The sense of homesickness that pervades the Heredian canon betrays a certain Romantic affinity. Unfortunately, that affinity has gone largely unstudied in Heredia scholarship. The problem owes, at least in part, to a manner in which critical discussion of the poet's work has developed historically. Toward the end of the Nineteenth Century, Menéndez y Pelayo set the tone by crowning the Argentine writer Esteban Echeverría "[el] patriarca de la poesía romántica" (II: 370), and suggesting that, despite certain vague similarities, "el romanticismo, propiamente dicho, tiene poco que reclamar en los versos de Heredia" (I: 236). Years later the Argentine critic Emilio Carilla reached virtually the same conclusion (*Poesía* 73). Subsequent critics (Díaz, González, Mañach, and Menton, among others) have sought to revise this judgment, arguing that Heredia, far from belonging to what Menéndez y Pelayo called "[la] aurora tenue del romanticismo" (I: 235), was in fact its founding exponent in Latin American poetry. Yet those who advocate—rightly, in my view—on behalf of Heredia's inclusion in the Romantic canon often do so on the basis of certain Romantic topoi: the exaltation of passion over reason, a fascination with ruins, the importance of nature, the preeminence of the individual ego, and so forth. I do not, of course, wish to deny the significance of these characteristics. Clearly any attempt to adjudicate the question of Heredia's relationship to Romanticism will have to take them into account. Nevertheless, the critical tendency to which they give voice has had the effect of obscuring the extent to which Heredia's Romanticism resides not at the level of poetic language, nor even at that of individual poems, but instead in an all-encompassing vision of reality that implicates life, literature, and the complex relationship between them.

Central to that vision is the question of homesickness. As M.H. Abrams convincingly argued in his landmark study *Natural Supernaturalism* (1973), Romanticism's great achievement was to resituate traditional theological concepts and plot patterns within a thoroughly secularized, naturalistic framework (*Natural Supernaturalism* 13, 65). One such "plot pattern," drawn from the Christian drama of redemption, is the idea of a "circuitous journey" that begins in primal unity (Eden), passes through a lapse into "self-division" (Fall), and concludes with a return to a "higher unity" (Redemption). The whole trajectory of Romantic thought is thus premised on the possibility of a homecoming, one often figured in explicitly erotic terms as an "apocalyptic marriage" between lover and beloved that has roots in the eschatological reunion of Christ and the Church (*Natural Supernaturalism* 194). In a certain respect, the circuitous nature of Heredia's life is too obvious to merit mention. Every experience of exile and return is in some sense circular. What makes Heredia's case especially interesting is that he represents his exile and return to Cuba as coincident with Cuba's own circuitous journey from primitive unity, through a "fall" into tyranny and oppression, and finally a return to the "modelo inmortal" of liberty and equality ("Libertad" 257). This suggests, in turn, that the poet's circuitous journey is not a simple return to primitive innocence, but rather an upward spiral that culminates in a higher unity—a reunion, not with Cuba, but instead with a New Cuba, liberated from the forces of oppression and tyranny and restored to its natural state of unity and freedom.

The Romantic Coalescence of Subject and Object

The twin "circuitous journeys" that characterize both Heredia's life and his poetry take their cue from what is, indeed, a central Romantic topos: the notion of an intimate relationship between human consciousness and the natural world, or what Abrams calls the "coalescence of subject and object" ("Structure" 217). The theme goes back at least to the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, who put the notion of an analogically interrelated universe to theological use. With the Romantics, the idea that the poet discovers secret correspondences in the natural world gave way to the idea of a full-fledged fusion of the poet's consciousness with the surrounding landscape. "Nature is made thought and thought nature," writes Abrams, paraphrasing Coleridge, "both by their sustained interaction and by their seamless metaphoric continuity" ("Structure" 223). The Romantic poet, in other words, does not simply observe or describe the outer world, but rather effects a synthetic fusion with it.¹

Unsurprisingly, Abrams goes on to link this fusion between nature and human consciousness to landscape poetry ("Structure" 223), a link that provides a helpful transition to Latin American Romanticism. Although influenced primarily by Rousseau, Lamartine, and Chateaubriand, rather than Wordsworth and Coleridge (Díaz 82), Latin American Romantic poets were, as Emilio Carilla points out, primarily poets "de tipo paisajista" for whom the relationship between poetic consciousness and natural landscape assumed special importance (*Romanticismo* 194-95). On this point, Heredia was no exception. In fact, of the distinctly "Romantic" elements in the Heredian canon, the one most often emphasized is the degree to which his poetry reveals what Manuel Pedro González once called the "acoplamiento entre el estado emotivo y el paisaje" (84). But, while those critics who read Heredia as a Romantic do highlight the importance of the

subject-object relationship, they do not link it up with the larger themes of his poetry and life, particularly his exile. Such an omission is unfortunate, since understanding Heredia's poetry in terms of this central Romantic image provides a helpful tool for analyzing how he represents the experience of exile.

In order to appreciate that connection, let us examine briefly a few of Heredia's earliest poems, where what Abrams calls the "seamless metaphoric continuity" between mind and world figures most prominently. In "Misanropía" (1821), written when the poet was barely eighteen, Heredia's agonized internal state is mirrored by the "triste noche" and "la tierra en su tristeza." "Aquesta confusión," he continues, "en armonía / está con mi alma destrozada." The internal-external analogy reaches its climax when the poet exclaims: "¿El mundo padece como yo?" ("Misanropía" 98). Here, as González notes, Heredia employs nature as a "caja de resonancia" and thereby establishes a "concordancia" between his own state of mind and the state of the natural world (84). The world, in other words, has been animated by the poet's engagement and so is responsive to his moods and dispositions. The same point emerges even more clearly in another early poem, "En una tempestad" (1822), which begins with a direct address to the storm: "Huracán, huracán, venir te siento," followed by the implicit identification of the poet with the surrounding landscape: "[R]espiro entusiasmado / del señor de los aires el aliento." ("En una tempestad" 126). The "señor de los aires" is, of course, Aeolus, but the important point to notice is that Heredia is no longer simply observing a visual spectacle, but has rather internalized it, "breathed" it in. The result is that the boundary between subject and object, between mind and nature, begins to blur as the poet achieves a "fusión [...] con un paisaje real" (Díaz 82). As the poem ends, the sense, first evident in "Misanropía," that the outer world is responsive to the inner state of the poet, again comes to the fore. In the final stanza, for instance, when the poet invokes the "¡Sublime tempestad!", the landscape immediately responds, echoing back to the poet the voice of God: "Yo en ti me elevo / al trono del Señor: oigo en las nubes / el eco de su voz." ("En una tempestad" 126).

Exiles and Divisions

In each of these brief examples, Heredia's verse portrays a landscape that is sensitive and responsive to a poetic consciousness, which in turn assimilates itself to the landscape. The following section looks at the way in which Heredia figures the experience of exile—first in the United States, then in Mexico—as the rupture or breakdown of that intimate relationship. Let us begin with two poems, "Los placeres de la melancolía" (1825) and "Niágara" (1824), written during Heredia's brief stint in the United States (1823-1825).

Heredia left Cuba aboard the *Galaxi* on November 14, 1823, and arrived in Boston on December 4th of the same year (García Garófalo Mesa 162). He was immediately horrified by the cold. "No sé si entenderás los últimos párrafos," the poet wrote to a friend in Cuba shortly after his arrival, "porque la tinta está casi helada" ("Carta de Heredia a Domingo del Monte" 39). A few months later, Heredia moved from Boston to New York, where, between 1824 and 1825, he wrote "Los placeres de la melancolía," a long philosophical poem divided into seven parts. Thematically, the poem centers on the way in which melancholy acquires a degree of pleasantness by contrast with a number of

other opposed terms (“amor,” “dulzura,” “placer,” “gozo,” “felicidad,” etc.). The theme of exile, and the melancholy occasioned thereby, runs throughout, but becomes most explicit, in Section IV, to which I limit my analysis.

The opening lines read:

¡Patria...! Nombre cual triste delicioso
Al peregrino mísero, que vaga
Lejos del suelo que nacer le viera. (“Placeres de la melancolía” 193)

The poet begins with an apostrophe, followed by an ellipsis. In the last section, we saw how Heredia’s earliest poetry suggests an intimate, responsive relationship between poetic consciousness and surrounding landscape. In “Misantropía,” for instance, the world’s suffering seemed to respond to the poet’s, while in “En una tempestad,” the poet’s invocation of the “¡Sublime tempestad!” was immediately answered as the storm echoed back to the poet the voice of God (“En una tempestad” 128). In “Placeres,” by contrast, the invocation of Cuba is followed by an elliptical silence—as if the poet is waiting for a response. But none comes, and we quickly learn why. In the first line, the apostrophized “¡Patria...!” is immediately transformed into a “Nombre” (“Placeres” 193)—a shadowy and insubstantial signifier. Heredia’s once intimate and responsive relationship with the Cuban landscape has morphed into a relationship with a dead, unresponsive word. Yet it is not so much that words have lost their meaning as that language has come to the foreground *as* language. The experience of exile, in other words, underscores the status of “patria” as a *name*, a signifier which, of course, necessarily exists as part of a long chain of other signifiers. The spatial and temporal distance that necessarily separates sign from meaning mirrors Heredia’s own spatial and temporal distance from Cuba.

In the following stanza, the poet again highlights his temporal and spatial distance from Cuba by drawing an implicit contrast between the (past) time when “los campos / De Cuba parecieron a mis ojos” and the (present) time when “los campos / De Cuba” appear “a mi congojada fantasía” (“Placeres” 197). Yet the contrast is not only temporal; it has also to do with the poet’s faculties. Earlier, the relationship between poet and Cuba was characterized by direct vision (“a mis ojos”), but now the Cuban landscape is mediated by the poet’s imagination (“a mi congojada fantasía”). The presence of “congojada” is especially significant not only because it specifies the precise nature of the poet’s “fantasía,” but also because “ojos” carries no parallel modifier. While the former, visual relationship between poet and *patria* was direct and unmediated, the adjective “congojada” now literally stands between “los campos de Cuba” and the poet’s “fantasía” (“campos” / “congojada” / “fantasía”).

The importance of the contrast between “vision” and “fantasy” is further strengthened by the fact that the poem represents Cuba itself as a seeing-subject: “lejos del suelo que *nacer le viera*” (“Placeres” 193). With this line, Heredia characterizes his childhood in terms of mutual visual transaction between the poet and the Cuban landscape: just as he contemplated “los campos de Cuba,” so the Cuban landscape contemplated him. In exile, the visual reciprocity between poet and landscape breaks down. Now the poet “sees” Cuba, not with his eyes, but only with his *fantasía*, while Cuba does not see him at

all. If we think about this poem in relation to “Misanropía,” we see what Paul de Man, commenting on Wordsworth, calls “the transformation of an echo language into a language of the imagination,” a transformation which allows “consciousness to exist entirely by and for itself, independently of all relationship with the outside world” (*Rhetoric* 54, 16). For Wordsworth, the shift from “echo” to “imagination” is an improvement, since it allows the poet to take leave of the vagaries of the transitory world of matter and seek refuge in the infinite capacities of the human mind (*Rhetoric* 54). For Heredia, by contrast, the move to *fantasía* marks a decisive defeat because it means that the subject-object fusion, so pronounced in “Misanropía,” has broken down. It means, in other words, that he is in exile.

The theme of a fissure or split in the relationship between subject and object reappears in “Niágara” (1824), Heredia’s most famous poem and, at first glance, a text in which the coalescence of subject and object appears most pronounced. González, for instance, finds in “Niágara” a seamless “acoplamiento entre el estado emotivo y el paisaje” (84). Even Chacón y Calvo, who largely accepts Menéndez y Pelayo’s evaluation of Heredia as, at best, tenuously Romantic, reads the poem as establishing “un secreto ritmo [...] entre el mundo interior y el de la realidad física” (83). Heredia’s own comments have encouraged this view. On June 17, 1824, he wrote in a letter to his uncle Ignacio: “Yo no sé qué analogía tiene aquel espectáculo solitario y agreste con mis sentimientos. Me parecía ver en aquel torrente la imagen de mis pasiones y de las borrascas de mi vida” (“Manchester” 121). Despite this rather compelling evidence, it seems to me that there may be good reasons for calling into question these readings.

To begin, note that the poem’s opening lines are highly affected:

Templad mi lira, dádmela, que siento
En mi alma estremecida y agitada
Arder la inspiración. (“Niágara” 158)

Here Heredia reproduces a familiar Romantic motif. In the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth had defined “good poetry” as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (797). In the subsequent Romantic tradition, this view came to be associated with the idea that poetic inspiration and poetic expression must be more or less simultaneous, leading Jorge Mañach to declare that Romantic poetry was “esencialmente una poesía de improvisación” (213).²

In the case of “Niágara,” however, Heredia’s use of what might be called the “rhetoric of immediacy” yields precisely the opposite effect. First, by invoking the lyre, Heredia makes explicit that what we are about to witness will be not only a *poem*, but also a *lyric* poem—that is, a representation, a linguistic construct that belongs to a long tradition of other similar linguistic constructs. Further, the poem’s self-consciousness gives the opening lines of “Niágara” the feeling of a *parabasis*—that moment, common in Aristophanic, Greek comedy, in which the Chorus Leader steps to the front of the stage and addresses the audience directly. In the late Eighteenth Century, Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) found in *parabasis* an idea so attractively modern that he used it as the basis for an entire theory of irony. What intrigued Schlegel about comedic *parabasis* was the sense that it constituted

a self-conscious acknowledgment by the comedic dramatist of the fictionality or representationality of his work. Put differently, by having the chorus leader step forward and engage the audience directly, the dramatist shatters the “fictional illusion” and thus effects, in Schlegel’s words, the “complete interruption and dissolution [*Aufhebung*] of the play” (qtd. in Chaouli 200). The difference is that in Greek Comedy, the *parabasis* usually occurs towards the middle of the play. By placing his *parabasis* at the beginning, then, Heredia does not even give us time to be deluded. We know from the start that “Niágara” will not be a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” but rather what Paul de Man calls an expression of “fictional emotions” self-consciously invoked to create the “illusion” of spontaneity (*Blindness* 18).

Second, note that the opening line consists of a series of commands: “Templad mi lira, dádmela” “Niágara” 158). The fact that the poet has to request the means of expression (the lyre) from someone else (the implicit subject of “dádmela”) suggests that something stands between inspiration—“siento [...] / [...] arder la inspiración” (“Niágara” 158)—and the expression of that inspiration. This suggestion is further strengthened by the fact that “dádmela” makes the poet not a subject, but rather an *object*. What Mañach calls Heredia’s Romantic “panyoísmo” (203) is thus undermined by the presence of an implicit “you” that mediates inspiration and expression.

Already in the opening lines of “Niágara,” then, Heredia subverts, precisely by calling attention to, the Romantic trope of simultaneous inspiration and expression.³ As the poem proceeds, this disruption of the simultaneity of inspiration and expression works to sever the allegedly unmediated coupling of poetic consciousness and natural landscape. This disruption, I wish to suggest, occurs in a highly specific way, namely, through the presence of other *texts*. For instance, after the “Yo soy digno de contemplarte” (“Niágara” 159), where we might reasonably expect the process of subject-object coalescence to begin, the poet instead says:

Lo común y mezquino desdeñando,
Ansié por lo terrorífico y sublime.
Al despeñarse el huracán furioso,
Al retumbar sobre mí el rayo,
Palpitando gocé. (“Niágara” 159)

The reference to the “huracán furioso” seems to evoke Heredia’s 1822 poem “En una tempestad,” and indeed this short passage in “Niágara” redeploys much of the language of that earlier text (“despeñar,” “furor,” “retumbar,” and “rayo,” to cite only the obvious lexical overlap). The first point to notice, thus, is that Heredia is not merely *seeing* but also *reading* (and, as it were, transcribing). Therefore, while Heredia is, of course, not simply rewriting his own poems, his experience of Niagara is nevertheless coded and constructed through references to other, previous texts. The presence of these intertextual references, moreover, introduces an unmistakable element of temporality into the poem. If “Yo soy digno de contemplarte” suggests a relationship of immediacy and simultaneity between poet and landscape, that immediacy is at once undermined and stretched out along a temporal axis populated by other texts.

Later in the poem, after a series of images that do indeed seem to establish a kind of analogy or correspondence between poetic interiority and natural exteriority, the poet again pulls back:

¡Omnipotente Dios! En otros climas
Vi monstruos execrables,
Blasfemando tu nombre sacrosanto
Sembrar error y *fanatismo impío*,
Los campos inundar en *sangre* y llanto. (“Niágara” 160)

These lines evoke another of Heredia’s poems from 1822, “En el Teocalli de Cholula,” especially the penultimate stanza:

Esta inmensa estructura
Vio a la *superstición* más inhumana
En ella entronizarse. Oyó los gritos
De agonizantes víctimas, en tanto
Que el sacerdote, *sin piedad* ni espanto,
Les arrancaba el corazón sangriento.
Miró el vapor espeso de la *sangre*
Subir caliente al *ofendido cielo*. (“En el Teocalli de Cholula” 83)

As before, so now: Heredia’s relationship to the landscape is again constructed through references to other texts, such that the alleged “fusión del poeta con un paisaje real” (Díaz 82) is yet again mediated by their presence. More significant still is that in the immediately preceding stanza of “Niágara,” Heredia had employed a vertical image to describe the relationship between the poet and the waterfall:

El alma libre, generosa, fuerte [...]
Se siente *eleva*r cuando te nombra. (“Niágara” 160)

With the intrusion of “En el Teocalli de Cholula,” however, the verticality of the poet’s experience is flattened out, so to speak, as the poem stretches back into the past to pick up the intertextual reference. In both of these cases, then, the same occurrence seems to be happening. First, Heredia reveals that his experience of Niagara is coded by the memory of previous experiences—experiences which are, in turn, mediated textually by his own poetry. Second, the necessarily temporal structure of these intertextual references clashes with other elements of the poem. The simultaneity and immediacy implied by “Yo soy digno de contemplarte” is temporalized by the reference to “En una tempestad,” just as the poet’s “elevation” to the greatness of the waterfall is flattened, stretched out temporally by the reference to “En el Teocalli de Cholula.” Stanza six is thus at odds with stanza seven; stanza two is at odds with itself. Temporality wages war on simultaneity and verticality. It is as if the poem were trying to rip itself apart.

The tension in “Niágara” is thus not created through an analogy between the visual spectacle of the waterfall and “las pasiones y las borrascas” of the poet’s life, but rather between the poet’s relationship with the waterfall and the torrent of earlier texts that seem

to continually insinuate themselves into the structure of later ones. This, in turn, is just to say that “Niágara” implicitly foregrounds not the poet’s relationship with the natural landscape of Upstate New York, but rather his relationship with *time*. Another way of putting the same point would be to say that the primary figural mode of “Niágara” is *allegory*. Contrasting allegorical and symbolic diction, de Man writes, “whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin” (*Blindness* 207). In other words, while symbols (allegedly) link the poet’s consciousness directly to the outer scene (hence the language of “transaction,” “interplay,” and “coupling”), allegories are constituted by the temporal relationship between one text and another, previous text. In this way, de Man argues, allegorical diction acknowledges the inherent temporality of all signification—acknowledges that signs do not (and cannot) refer directly to the world but only to other signs. Therefore, by employing allegory in “Niágara,” Heredia implicitly figures, through the poem’s very rhetorical mode, his own spatial and temporal distance from the lost homeland.

Up to now, we have seen that Heredia’s experience of exile in the United States can be understood as the breakdown of the intimate correspondence or coalescence between subject and object so prominent in his pre-exile poetry. I would like now to turn to the exile poems written in Mexico. In these poems, two important experiences take place. First, Heredia characterizes Cuba under Spanish imperial oppression as a kind of fall into self-division and tyranny. Second, he links Cuba’s own return to unity and freedom with his own circuitous return to the island.

In September of 1825, Heredia came closer than ever to Cuba since his exile in 1823. After nearly two years in New York, the poet set sail aboard the *Chasseur* bound for Alvarado, Mexico. His fame preceded him. Upon learning of Heredia’s plan to visit Mexico, then-president Guadalupe Victoria expedited the poet’s passport and sent a personal letter declaring that his “intención de venir a esta República [...] será para mí de lo más estimable por la justicia que se hace en este país a sus virtudes y conocimientos” (qtd. in García Garófalo Mesa 192). Despite the promise of “cordial hospitalidad y fraternal abrigo” in Mexico (qtd. in García Garófalo Mesa 191), Cuba was never far from the poet’s mind. During the voyage, Heredia composed at least three poems, including “Himno del desterrado,” perhaps his most famous meditation on the agony of exile. As I shall argue, however, “Himno del desterrado,” should perhaps be titled “Himno de los desterrados,” since the poet’s representation of his own physical separation from the homeland parallels his representation of Cuba’s fall from innocence and freedom into a state of internal discord and division—if Heredia needs to be reunited with Cuba, then Cuba needs, in some sense, to be reunited with itself.

Before examining “Himno del desterrado,” though, let us turn to another, slightly later text, Heredia’s ode “Libertad,” written in Mexico in 1830. Although “Libertad” and “Himno” are thematically continuous, I treat “Libertad” first because it is simpler and more explicit in its figuration of Cuba’s condition under Spanish colonial rule as a sort of “fall” into division and separation. This makes it useful for framing the discussion of the more complicated “Himno.”

Much like “Himno,” “Libertad” represents the establishment of the principle of freedom as coincident with the moment in which the creator “sobre sus ejes a la tierra puso” (“Libertad” 257). Tyranny and oppression, by contrast, are figured as a separation from this “modelo inmortal” (“Libertad” 257). Freedom, in other words, is natural and originary, while tyranny is a deviation, or aberration. Sources for this image abound in Romantic philosophy and literature, but all have as their ultimate source the three-fold motion of Plotinian Neo-Platonism. For Plotinus, the first principle of the universe is the absolute, undifferentiated unity of the One. Since the One is coextensive with the Good, the presence of Evil in the world is explained as a series of “emanations” that constitute an ever-increasing separation from the unity of the One. On Plotinus’ account, then, the Good is essential and absolute unity, while Evil, is its opposite: division, separation, privation, and multiplicity (Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 147). Furthermore, the present state of separation from the “immortal model” is only a temporary interlude in a longer journey that eventually circles back to the beginning. Plotinus gives the name “epistrophe” to this process that opposes “emanation.” Heredia uses no such term but he does characterize the state of tyranny and colonial oppression in Cuba as a phase or detour in a longer pilgrimage. “¿Nunca los hombres vivirán como hermanos?” the poet asks “¿Los crímenes ¡oh Dios! y los tiranos / Han de durar mientras que dure el mundo?” (“Libertad” 257). To which comes the immediate response: “No.” The emphatic “No”—the importance of which is underscored by the fact that it stands not only at the beginning of a line but also at the beginning of a stanza—constitutes the turning point of the poem and initiates Heredia’s “epistrophic” return to the immortal model of liberty. This epistrophe, moreover, is represented explicitly as a return to the purity of the natural world. In the fourth stanza, for instance, “el ingenio humano” joins forces with the elements of nature to oppose tyrannical oppression:

¿Podéis adormecer el viento alado,
O de los astros enfrenar el vuelo,
O encadenar la furia del Océano?
Pues el ingenio humano
Es fuerte como el mar y el viento y el cielo. (“Libertad” 258)

Earlier, Heredia had described tyranny as a “lunar en la frente de la Natura” (“Libertad” 258)—a stain or blotch that tarnishes its purity. Here he picks up the same theme by figuring the battle against the “criminal tirano” as a collaboration between the “hombre oprimido” and the natural world. The first implication is that by oppressing human beings, the tyrant acts contrary to the natural order. Further, by associating the oppressed with nature, the poet not only highlights the inherent naturalness of freedom, but also suggests that just as human beings are ultimately defenseless against the power of nature, so the tyrant is ultimately at the mercy of the divine “modelo inmortal” (“Libertad” 257), which dictates liberty rather than tyranny. Finally, in the last stanza, Earth is “despertada” as from a long, lethargic sleep and inundated with “luz intelectual, celeste y pura” (“Libertad” 258). “Pura” contrasts strongly with Heredia’s description of life in Cuba under tyrannical oppression as “servidumbre impura” (“Desengaños” 246), while “celeste” recalls the celestial origin of freedom described in the opening stanza. The end of the poem is thus not only a return to nature in its unblemished purity, but also a return

to the originary, divine source of liberty—to the “modelo inmortal” from which tyranny constituted a deviation.

With this in mind, let us return to “Himno del desterrado.” Written in 1825 during Heredia’s voyage to Mexico, the poem begins when the tranquility of “el sol y las olas serenas” and/but is violently interrupted by the shout of an unidentified “they”:

¡Tierra! claman: ansiosos miramos
Al confín del sereno horizonte
Y a lo lejos descúbrese un monte...
Lo conozco...Ojos tristes, ¡llorad! (“Himno del desterrado” 171)

If one knew nothing about Heredia’s life, one might plausibly interpret these lines as the beginning of a hymn on the poet’s triumphant return to Cuba for, at this point in the poem, there is nothing to suggest that the destination of the ship mentioned in line three is not the “*¡Tierra!*” of line five. This otherwise plausible interpretation must be revised when we reach the end of the first stanza, where the appearance of “Ojos tristes, ¡llorad!” indicates that something has gone terribly wrong. Before trying to determine what that is, we should note the presence of two words: “miramos” and “ojos.” In “Los placeres de la melancolía,” the experience of exile displaced the reciprocal visual relationship between the poet and Cuba into the poet’s imagination (*fantasía*): “los campos de Cuba” once appeared “a mis ojos,” Heredia told us, but now they appear “a mi congojada fantasía.” With “miramos” and “ojos” (and, a little later, “te vuelvo a mirar”) that lost visual presence seems to have been restored. But this restoration, as we quickly learn, is an illusion: “¡Y te vuelvo a mirar...! ¡Cuán severo / Hoy me oprime el rigor de mi suerte!” (“Himno del desterrado” 172). The poet’s vision of Cuba is immediately associated with, and undermined by, the cruel “rigor de mi suerte.” Sight, which in “Placeres” seemed to constitute a presence of which “fantasía” was a derivation, now shows itself to be inadequate. In the next lines, the poet specifies the precise cause of his distressing “suerte”: “La opresión me amenaza con muerte / En los campos do al mundo nací” (“Himno del desterrado” 172). Any expectation that the exiled poet might be returning to his homeland is here definitively undermined by the recognition that the “*¡Tierra!*” of line five has become a possible source of death for the poet. By delicious paradox, the poem suggests that the same Cuba that gave the poet life now threatens to take it away.

As the text proceeds, Heredia’s physical separation from the island—a separation occasioned by “[l]a opresión que me amenaza con muerte”—is transferred to the island itself:

¡Dulce Cuba! en tu seno se miran
En su grado más alto y profundo,
La belleza del físico mundo,
Los horrores del mundo moral.
Te hizo el Cielo la flor de la tierra:
Mas tu fuerza y destinos ignoras,
Y de España en el déspota adoras
Al demonio sangriento del mal. (“Himno del desterrado” 173)

Here the poet repeats the description of Cuba as “dulce,” and goes on to call the island “la flor de la tierra.” “Flor” carries obvious connotations of beauty, purity, and naturalness. In this case, moreover, Cuba’s status as “la flor de la tierra” is underwritten by “el Cielo,” a fact which transmutes an apparently naturalistic image into one suggesting divine intention and providence. Translated into the language of “Libertad,” the “flor” links heaven and earth and so marks, figuratively, the point at which Cuba was most closely united with the “modelo inmortal” of liberty. However, the island has unfortunately “fallen”: “Mas tu fuerza y destinos ignoras.” The precise meaning of this “fall” had been specified earlier by the contrast between “la belleza del físico mundo” and “los horrores del mundo moral.” With this contrast, the poet explicitly characterizes Cuba’s present condition as a kind of internal division in which two radically opposed “worlds” are juxtaposed to one another, a juxtaposition subtly underscored by the chiasmic structure of the lines (“físico mundo [...] mundo moral”). The abrupt shift from the preterite (“te hizo el Cielo”) to the present (“ignoras”) also echoes an earlier verbal shift in which the poet first said of Cuba, “vida me *diste*,” and then added, “[y] te *vuelvo* a mirar” (“Himno del desterrado” 171-172). In both cases (Cuba’s and Heredia’s), the tense shift tracks a temporal journey from unity and happiness through a fall into discord and division. Just as the poet is separated from the island that gave him life, so Cuba is divided from its divinely ordained destiny as the flower of the earth.

Yet all is not lost:

¡Cuba, al fin te verás libre y pura!
 Como el aire de luz que respiras,
 cual las ondas hirvientes que miras
 de tus playas la arena besar. (“Himno del desterrado” 174)

Cuba’s redemption from division and discord to liberty and purity is figured by two similes. The first suggests that, someday, Cuba will be free and pure, “como el aire de luz que respiras.” This appears to be a straightforward, naturalistic image suggesting that Cuban liberty is “as natural as the air we breathe,” but the presence of “luz” complicates matters. On the one hand, light is natural, but it is also associated with the sun and the sky (“el Cielo”) and so links this image to Cuba’s divine destiny as the “flower of the earth.” Cuba’s flower, in other words, has been torn asunder, and the “aire de luz” has stepped in to heal that division and return the island to a state of divinely-ordained unity and freedom.

If the first simile of Cuba’s return to purity and freedom bridges the natural and the supernatural, the second links the natural and the erotic: “cual las ondas hirvientes que miras / de tus playas la arena besar.” Here Cuban liberation is conceived in erotic terms as the union of the boiling waves and the sandy beach, a union which serves as a metaphor for the healing of the island’s internal tensions. The presence of the erotic image is unsurprising, since the unifying, restorative power of love was something of a Romantic commonplace. In the context of Heredia’s poetry, though, the image of the waves kissing the sandy beach is especially significant because in one of his last poems, “Al océano,” the poet employs the same figure to describe his own reunion with Cuba.

Even in the context of “Himno del desterrado,” the healing of Cuba’s internal division is linked intimately to the poet’s own redemption. In the third stanza, he exclaims: “¡Cuánto sueño de gloria y ventura / [t]engo unido a tu sueño feliz!” (“Himno del desterrado” 172). Cuba’s “sueño feliz,” as we have learned throughout the poem, can be nothing but the restoration to unity of an island stricken by internal division and turmoil. And it is to this “happy dream” that Heredia’s own “sueño de gloria y ventura” is inextricably bound. Not only, then, does Heredia want to be restored to Cuba; he wants also to be restored to a restored Cuba. His real, circuitous return, unlike the false start of “Himno del desterrado,” will thus coincide with the healing of Cuba’s internal division and its own circuitous return to its divinely ordained status as the flower of the earth.

Return: Heredia’s Apocalyptic Marriage

Heredia wrote “Himno del desterrado” in 1825 as his ship passed by the Cuban coast bound for Alvarado, Mexico. He would not see the island again until 1836 when then-Governor Miguel Tacón granted the poet’s request for a short visit. During this later voyage from Veracruz to Havana, Heredia wrote another poem, “Al océano,” an ode to the sea that gathers together many of the themes of his earlier verse. “Al océano” and “Himno” are similar in terms of dramatic situation (in both cases, the poet is at sea), but they differ radically in mood and tone. If “Himno del desterrado” constitutes a kind of false-start by creating the expectation that the poet is returning to Cuba only later to undermine it, “Al océano” represents the full-fledged fusion between Heredia and the lost fatherland.

The poem begins with two consecutive exclamations: “¡Qué! ¡De las ondas el hervor insano / Mece por fin mi pecho estremecido!” (“Al océano” 286). The second line is enclosed by two related verbs: “mecer” and “estremecer.” The first describes the action of the sea upon the poet (“Mece [...] mi pecho”), while the second describes the state or condition of the poet acted upon by the sea (“mi pecho estremecido”). The intimate linguistic connection between the two verbs already suggests a close correspondence between the poet and the natural landscape. The ocean’s “mecer” of the poet mirrors the poet’s own “estremecido” interiority. Inner echoes outer echoes inner. As the text proceeds, this analogical relationship between poetic consciousness and natural world morphs into a series of images that shift back and forth between visibility and aural. The poet tells us, for instance, that the ocean’s “solemne música” is “[d]ulce a mi oído” (“Al océano” 286), but then immediately adds: “¡Oh! cuántas veces en ardientes sueños / [g]ozoso *contemplaba* / [t]u ondulación.” Later, the visual spectacle of the ocean yields an aural effect: “Y la olvidada lira / [n]uevos tonos armónicos suspira” (“Al océano” 287). In many of these cases, the relationship between poet and landscape is reciprocal. The line, “[d]ulce a mi oído / [e]s tu solemne música,” is later echoed by the poet’s assurance that “[m]e oyes, benigno mar.” Just as the poet hears the music of the sea, so the sea hears the poet. The reciprocity between poet and fatherland—a reciprocity severed in “Placeres”—is thus restored.

These aural and visual figures are still of the subject-object variety. The poet (subject) sees the ocean (object), while the ocean (subject) hears the poet (object). Yet this strict dichotomy will not last long. Consider, for example, the way in which the ocean functions

within the poem. Its primary role is to serve as the vehicle of the poet's return to Cuba. But it does so in two importantly different senses. First, and most obviously, the ocean literally transports the poet from Veracruz to Havana. But there is a second, and more interesting, sense in which the sea functions as a vehicle of return—one that places Heredia directly in the tradition of “circuitous journeys” described by Abrams. The first point to note is that as the poem proceeds, verbs like “respirar,” “inspirar,” and “suspirar,” as well as nouns like “brisa,” “aliento,” and “inspiración,” begin to dominate. Visual and aural imagery is thus replaced (or rather drowned out) by a cascade of images centered on “breath” or “wind.” Even the line “[m]i desmayado acento / [t]u misteriosa inspiración reanime” (“Al océano” 287) operates implicitly on this principle: *reanimar* derives from the Latin *anima*, whose Greek cognate, *anemos*, means “breath” or “wind.” The change in imagery also signals a decisive shift away from a characterization of the poet's relationship with Cuba in subject-object terms. The sea, the poet tells us, is an “[e]lemento vital de mi existencia.” A few lines earlier he had exclaimed:

¡Oh! cuántas veces en ardientes sueño /
 [...]
 de tu fresco brisa
 El aliento salubre respiraba! (“Al oceano” 286)

These lines (and others like them) suggest that the poet is no longer merely *looking at* or *hearing* the ocean, but rather that he has, in some sense, *identified* himself with it; he has internalized it, “breathed it in.” It has, quite literally, become a part of him.⁴

This internalizing gesture has important implications for how we interpret the rest of the poem, specifically the poet's characterization of the sea as the “[d]ivino esposo de la madre tierra” (“Al océano” 287). If Heredia represents himself as somehow ontologically continuous with the sea, and if he represents the sea as the “divino esposo” of the earth, then “Al océano” becomes less an ode to the ocean and more an epithalamion announcing Heredia's apocalyptic matrimony with Cuba. My reading of the poem as a “spousal verse” (Wordsworth, “Prospectus” 31) grows yet more compelling if we recall “Himno del desterrado.” In that poem, the image of the “ondas hirvientes” kissing the sandy beach functioned as an erotic metaphor of Cuba's return to a state of natural, originary liberty. “Al océano” recycles similar language:

De las *ondas* el *hervor* insano / Mece por fin mi pecho estremecido
 [...]
 Fuertes cual hoy, sonoras y brillantes,
 Llenas de vida férvida tus ondas,
 Abrazarán las playas resonantes. (“Al océano” 287, emphasis added)

Only a few months earlier, Heredia had used the verb “abrazar” in a famous letter to Tacón, requesting permission to visit Cuba. “Pensé volver a esa isla,” he wrote, “si no para establecerme otra vez en el seno de mi familia, al menos para tener la satisfacción de abrazarla, y pasar algunos día con ella” (qtd. in López Prieto lix). In this text, the erotic force, which in “Himno del desterrado” figured the healing of Cuba's internal division, is transferred to the poet's relationship with his lost homeland. To read “Himno” and “Al

océano” together, then, would be to say that just as Cuba’s internal divisions have been healed by the power of *eros*, so Heredia has been reunited erotically with Cuba. It would be to say, in other words, that the circuitous journeys are complete.

Circuitous Breakdown: Heredia’s Letter to Tacón

However, despite the buoyant, almost prophetic tone of “Al océano,” Heredia’s return to Cuba in 1836 was hardly an occasion for joy. The poet was indeed a kind of Prodigal Son, but his arrival at the port of Havana called for no celebration and no fatted calf—quite the opposite. He was greeted (and almost immediately abandoned) by one, and only one, of his old friends, Domingo del Monte, the same friend who, in a letter to Heredia dated the same month, called the poet “el ángel caído de mi corazón” (qtd. in García Garófalo Mesa 612). Another old friend, Félix Manuel Tanco y Bosmeniel, was even more scathing. “He visto y abrazado a José María Heredia,” he wrote to del Monte: “Lo abrazaba y sentía vergüenza, sentía indignación, sentía lástima. Lo veía como un desertor, como un tráfuga abatido, humillado, sin poesía, sin encanto, sin virtud [...] Heredia siempre será poeta, pero poeta sin fe” (qtd. in García Garófalo Mesa 614). Such harsh words answered not only to the sense that Heredia had fled Cuba to save his own skin, but also, and worse, that he had abandoned the ideal of Cuban liberation for which his poetry had made him famous.

Whether or not such criticism was justified, del Monte and Tanco y Bosmeniel were certainly right that Heredia’s time in Mexico had drained him of nearly all revolutionary zeal. When the poet arrived in Mexico in late 1825, he wrote in a letter to his mother: “[E]ste país sigue en un estado de paz y prosperidad que asombra. Conceda Dios a mi patria días tan serenos y puros como los que hoy ilumina a México” (qtd. in Chacón y Calvo 119). Over the next ten years, however, the poet watched the struggle for Mexican independence degenerate into an anarchical bloodbath (Chacón y Calvo 128), his intimate friendship with Santa Anna dissolve, and his financial situation slowly deteriorate (Esténger 136). In the mid-1830s, Heredia confessed to Tomás Gener “ya no es posible que un hombre de bien viva en este desgraciado país” (qtd. in Esténger 137). By April of 1836, the situation was so desperate that Heredia wrote the now-famous letter to then-Governor of Cuba, Captain General Miguel Tacón, requesting permission to return to the island. Much like his pre-exile missal to Francisco Hernández Morejón, the letter to Tacón has proven controversial. Lezama Lima calls it “polémica” (17), and Esténger dedicates an entire chapter of his biography of Heredia to “la carta inoportuna” (141-50). The letter is also significant because it allows us to specify the precise moment, and the precise way, in which the parallel circuitous journeys (Heredia’s and Cuba’s) break down.

To see how, let us to look at two of the letter’s key rhetorical moves. Midway through the missive, Heredia, referring to his previous involvement in revolutionary activity in Cuba, writes:

Es verdad que ha doce años la independencia de Cuba era el más ferviente de mis votos [...] pero las calamidades y miserias que estoy presenciando hace ocho años han modificado mucho mis opiniones, y vería como un

crimen cualquier tentativa para transplantar a la feliz y opulenta Cuba los males que afligen al continente americano. (qtd. in López Prieto lix)

Various elements of this small excerpt cry out for interpretation: the conflation of revolutionary fervor and religious devotion (“votos”); the language of criminality (“crimen”), which links this letter to the “crímenes horrendos” of his earlier letter to Morejón; and the surprising description of Cuba as “feliz y opulenta.” My interest lies with a single word: *transplantar*. I have argued throughout this essay that, in the poetry of mid-1820s, Heredia figures Cuban liberation as a return to a natural, primordial state of unity from which tyranny constituted a deviation. In “Himno del desterrado,” freedom is as natural as “el aire de luz que respiras” and the ocean waves gently kissing the shore; in “Oda,” the wind itself cries “¡Libertad!” (“Oda” 166); and in “Libertad,” freedom is equated with the divine “modelo inmortal,” while tyranny and oppression constitute an aberration to be overcome by an inundation of “luz intelectual, celeste y pura” (“Libertad” 258). In this letter, by contrast, what once seemed natural has become artificial and forced. Cuban independence would not, according to the demoralized, ailing Heredia of late 1836, be a return to a “modelo inmortal,” but rather a “transplant—an unnatural, unsightly prosthesis grafted onto an otherwise “feliz y opulenta Cuba.” It is no longer tyranny but rather independence that counts as a criminal deviation from the order of nature.

This shift from the natural to the artificial coincides with another key rhetorical move. As I suggested earlier, in the exile poems of the mid- and late-1820s, Heredia linked Cuban independence to his own circuitous return to the island, such that the poet’s redemption from his “fall” into exile was to coincide with Cuba’s own return to the “immortal model” of unity and freedom (recall “Himno del desterrado” and “Libertad”). In the letter to Tacón, this parallel collapses. Anticipating the accusation that his trip has “un objeto revolucionario,” Heredia writes: “Doy desde luego a V.E. mi solemne palabra de honor de no mezclarme en asuntos políticos mientras permanezca en Cuba, si se digna permitirme que vuelva” (qtd. in López Prieto lix). With these words Heredia explicitly divests his own return to Cuba of any revolutionary connotations. But the move is stronger still. It is not only that Heredia’s return to Cuba has been severed from Cuba’s return to the immortal model of freedom, but also that the two “returns” are now mutually exclusive. In fact, the letter to Tacón rests its entire case upon the promise *not* to engage in political activity in Cuba. The logic of the situation appears to be this: if the poet is to return to Cuba, he must surrender the possibility of Cuban independence; if he is to hold out hope for said independence, he must surrender the possibility of returning to the island. Bringing one half of the circle to completion (the poet’s return to island) necessarily means sacrificing the other half (Cuba’s return to the “immortal model” of unity and freedom). And so the “circuitous journey” breaks down. Heredia would indeed return to Cuba in late 1836, but that return was not an upward spiral that culminated in higher unity (a reunion with a new, liberated Cuba). It was instead a simple, vicious circle, one that began again three short months later when Heredia was forced to abandon the island and return to Mexico—this time for good.

Heredia and the Failure of Romanticism

In a certain, undeniable sense, the Heredian project failed. Cuban independence only materialized long after his death in 1839, and even then only haltingly. Likewise, his own return to the island in 1836 was, as del Monte's and Tanco y Bosmeniel's remarks make clear, bought at the price of a renunciation of the ideals for which his poetry had made him famous. Yet, perhaps that failure is part of the point. In a short 1969 essay, the French philosopher and literary critic Maurice Blanchot argued that Romanticism always "ends badly" because it is trapped in an indissoluble conflict between two competing tendencies: the desire for absolute knowledge and epistemological closure, on the one hand, and the awareness that such closure is impossible on the other (164). In his 1983 study of English Romanticism, Jerome McGann arrived at a version of the same conclusion. There he argued that because Romantic poetry is "a poetry of Ideals," its "greatest moments of artistic success are almost always associated with loss, failure, and defeat" (132). Even more specifically, Romanticism's triumphs become visible only when "the pursuit [of those ideals] is thwarted and interrupted, and finally broken" (134). Heredia was, if nothing else, a poet of failure, a poet for whom reality rarely coincided with its ideal. Not, of course, for want of trying, but instead because matters grew complicated—because other goals and ideals interposed themselves. What we get is, after all, seldom what, in the smiling exuberance of youth, we thought we wanted. So, yes, failure—but it is perhaps in that failure (which, as McGann intimates, is also a kind of triumph) that Heredia's Romanticism finally resides.

Georgetown College

Notes

- ¹ For more on this theme, see Abrams (“Structure” 223) and de Man (*Blindness* 193, 199-220 and *Rhetoric* 51-59).
- ² On this point, see Díaz (125). It is also worth pointing out that Wordsworth’s own poetics was not essentially improvisational. In the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*, for instance, he observes that while poetry is “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” it nevertheless “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (795). I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for *Decimonónica* for this astute observation.
- ³ Other critics have noted a similar artificiality in Heredia’s treatment of Niagara. Luciani, for instance, rightly points out that by the time of his visit in 1824, “an ‘encounter with the sublime’ at Niagara” was already a “literary commonplace.” He goes on to wonder whether Heredia’s experience was perhaps “predetermined by certain established formulas” (Luciani).
- ⁴ Cintio Vitier’s well-known *Lo cubano en la poesía* was the first to describe Cuban poetry in terms of the progressive internationalization of the insular landscape.

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