

Introduction

The Life of José María Heredia

Early on a Monday evening in April 1824, a young Cuban gentleman wound his way in nervous excitement through the streets of New York toward the park in front of City Hall. His spoken English was halting—he had arrived in the city as a political exile just a few months before—but he read it very well, and he had noticed an unsettling announcement in the New York papers. A public demonstration in support of DeWitt Clinton, and against the state legislators who had removed him as president of the Erie Canal Commission, would be held that day at five o'clock. The young man's own experience as a participant in a thwarted rebellion against Spanish rule in Cuba, and the draconian crackdown that had followed, made him fear the worst for this demonstration: a riot or a violent confrontation with police. He had to see for himself how such a protest would unfold in the country in which he had found refuge.

In the park the young man witnessed a scene that left him shaking his head in slightly incredulous relief. As he would recount in a letter to his uncle in Cuba, the demonstration began when a speaker got up on a table to give a vehement speech in support of Clinton. Some toughs from an opposing party elbowed their way through the crowd and upset the table, tumbling the speaker to the ground. Unhurt and unfazed, he dusted himself off, climbed onto the table again and continued his oration, this time with a cordon of allies surrounding the table to keep the opposition at bay. After he concluded his speech, an agreement was made to send a delegation to Clinton and express, on behalf of the people of New York, support for him and displeasure with the state legislature's unjust action. The proclamation thus framed, the crowd dispersed with

some minor scuffling among the contending factions, but nary a sign of a public official or law enforcement officer during the entire episode. There was nothing to fear: this new republic may have been born of revolution, but its institutions and rough-hewn citizens seemed to have an uncanny capacity for containing and channeling partisan passions.

It is not surprising that the young man who witnessed that demonstration before New York's City Hall should have had an instinctive fear of a spark that might ignite political and social turmoil. José María Heredia (Cuba 1803–Mexico 1839) was a true child of the Age of Revolution, and his short and eventful life was marked decisively by the upheavals on the American continent as new republics struggled to emerge from the old colonial order.¹ He was born in Santiago de Cuba on December 31, 1803; being born there was itself a consequence of revolution. His parents, José Francisco Heredia y Mieses and María de la Merced Heredia y Campuzano, were members of the same extended family of landowners in the island colony of Santo Domingo; the family traced its American roots to the Spanish *conquistador* Pedro de Heredia. In the wake of the Treaty of Basel, which conceded the Spanish portion of Hispaniola to France in 1795, José Francisco and María de la Merced, like many others of their race and class, fled Santo Domingo before the invading forces of Toussaint Louverture, fearing that the violence of the Haitian Revolution might engulf the whole island.

The erudite and principled José Francisco was to play out the rest of his life as a loyal subject of the Spanish crown, in judicial and administrative posts in Pensacola in Spanish Florida, Venezuela, and Mexico. He occupied these posts against the backdrop of two related struggles for independence: that of Spain as it fought a war of liberation against the forces of Napoleon, which invaded the Peninsula in 1808; and that of the Spanish colonies against the mother country, precipitated by the usurpation of the Spanish throne by Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte, who ruled Spain as José I from 1808 to 1813. The Heredia family—José Francisco; María de la Merced; their eldest child, José María; and his four sisters²—crisscrossed the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico during the twilight years of Spanish rule on the American mainland, suffering separation, shipwreck, and flight before advancing insurgent armies. José Francisco was no admirer of revolution; as administrator in Venezuela, he witnessed its excesses and ravages.

José Francisco provided his son with a fine education in the classics, in literature and languages, and in the principles of the Catholic faith. He also instilled in his son a lifelong reverence for the rule of law, although

politically José María would come to diverge from his father's conservative tendencies.³ Because of his father's multiple postings, José María spent most of his early years outside the land of his birth. Yet his sense of *patria*, initially linked with a Spain in the throes of its own liberation efforts and experiments in constitutional rule, was to become bound with his Cuban identity. As a law student in Havana, he breathed the air of uneasy excitement that the island colony was experiencing as ripples of the mainland independence struggles found their way to its shores. Emotional identification with Cuba, discontent with the island's colonial status, and a commitment to the principles of constitutional democracy were to be essential elements of Heredia's thought and wellsprings for the patriotic verses through which he would give voice to the struggle for Cuban independence.

The year 1820 found the Heredia family in Mexico, where José Francisco occupied a Spanish government post; when he died suddenly, his wife and children returned to Cuba. The family settled in Matanzas, a small coastal city and provincial capital. While far from wealthy—the death of José Francisco left his wife and children in some financial difficulty—the Heredias were well connected among Cuba's *criollo* elite, and surrounded by a prosperous extended family. That family included María de la Merced's younger brother Ignacio, a lawyer and coffee planter with whom José María was exceptionally close. In Havana, José María finished the study of law; in June of 1823 he was awarded his degree, and he prepared to take up practice.

By then, Heredia was gaining attention within his circle and beyond as a gifted poet. His early compositions give a sense of his amorous infatuations and political idealism, and his adaptations of French and Latin works suggest the scope of his erudition and a desire to hone his talent by imitating literary models. A few of these early works show that, although he was barely more than an adolescent, Heredia was approaching full command of his art. His poem "En el teocalli de Cholula," begun in Mexico when he was only sixteen, is a striking example.⁴ A meditation upon the ruins of a pre-Hispanic temple, it is considered among Heredia's most accomplished works. It contains the elements that distinguish his best poetry: a precise observation of landscape, a sure handling of lexicon and meter, a sweeping historical vision, a stern moral sensibility, and an Americanist scope that transcends classical and European paradigms.

In his late teenage years in Cuba, Heredia forged friendships that would sustain him for the rest of his short life. One of these was especially intense and would prove decisive for his poetic career and legacy.

Domingo del Monte (1804–1853) was a key figure in Cuban thought and letters in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like Heredia, he was trained in law and keenly interested in literature. Del Monte was to make his mark principally as editor and critic, as a patron and champion of Cuban writers, and as the host of gatherings of the island's most prominent intellectuals and writers. No one was more important than Del Monte in the editing, sponsoring, and dissemination of Heredia's poetry. Although separated geographically after 1823, the two men would have a close, if complicated, lifelong friendship.⁵

These, then, were the circumstances of Heredia's life during the last months of 1823, as his twentieth birthday neared. He was a newly credentialed and well-connected lawyer; the potential breadwinner for his widowed mother and younger sisters; a well-educated young man of varied intellectual interests; a poet discovering his voice and making a name for himself in Cuban literary circles; a political idealist *au courant* with evolving events in Europe and the American mainland; and an energetic roustabout, buoyed by the companionship of Domingo del Monte and other young Cubans who were living heady days of political change. All signs must have pointed toward a future of success and happiness.

But Heredia's life was about to take a sudden turn. Given his ideals and his social environment, perhaps it was inevitable that he would be caught up in the pro-independence agitation then sweeping Cuba. In July 1823, government authorities became aware of an island-wide conspiracy with masonic affiliations known as the *Soles y Rayos de Bolívar*, whose aim was to foment armed rebellion against Spanish rule. More than six hundred individuals across the island were implicated in the plot. Heredia had been active in the Matanzas cell of the *Soles*, known as the *Caballeros Racionales*. In a bid for leniency, three fellow members of the *Caballeros* denounced him as an important figure in the group, and in early November an order was issued for his arrest. But Heredia had gone into hiding; through the intercession of a young friend, Josefa ("Pepilla") Arango (the "Emilia" to whom Heredia would address a letter from exile and a major poem, both contained herein), he found refuge on the Arango family plantation near Matanzas. After a week there, he slipped out of the island in disguise aboard the American ship *Galaxy* bound for Boston. His separation from Cuba, which would continue almost uninterrupted for the rest of his life, had begun.⁶

Heredia endured the rough passage north bundled in the coat that the *Galaxy's* captain loaned him. He reached a snowy Boston on

December 4, 1823, and within a few days ran across fellow conspirators Luciano Ramos and Miguel María Caraballo, the first of what would be an expanding group of Cuban expatriates with whom he would share lodgings, travels, and adventures. The three young men soon moved to New York City, where Heredia would live for most of the rest of his twenty months in the United States.⁷ In New York, Heredia was better able to receive letters from home, thanks to the ship traffic between that city and Cuban ports, and through the good offices of countryman Cristóbal Madan, an employee at the trading firm of Goodhue & Co. Moreover, Leonardo Santos Suárez, Tomás Gener, and Félix Varela had arrived in New York just a week before; these three Cuban delegates to the Spanish *Cortes* had fled Spain, charged with treason upon the dissolution of that body by Ferdinand VII and the end of Spain's experiment in constitutional rule. These and companions from elsewhere in Spanish America would provide Heredia with friendship, moral support, and a reprieve from his forced immersion in the English language. If Heredia also engaged in any political machinations with fellow expatriates, they left little or no documentary trace.

Heredia's struggles with English made securing employment in New York difficult. A monthly stipend that his Uncle Ignacio sent from Cuba kept him financially afloat, and toward the end of his stay he also obtained a salary, room, and board as a Spanish teacher at a private school in the city. His modest resources were sufficient to purchase books, to take advantage of cultural opportunities—years later he would recall a stirring performance of *Richard III* in New York—and for travels in the summer of 1824. Although relatively free of financial worries, Heredia still faced physical and psychological challenges. The northern winters aggravated his predisposition to consumptive illnesses; in the winter of 1825, his condition was grave. He worried for the well-being of his mother and sisters in Cuba. He felt bitterness over the betrayal he had suffered at the hands of fellow conspirators. He anxiously awaited the outcome of the judicial hearings on the island regarding the *Soles y Rayos* plot and the fate of those implicated in it. And he felt a certain cultural alienation in the United States coupled with fierce nostalgia for the land from which he had been torn—as *destierro* and *desterrado*, his words of choice for describing his situation, vigorously express.

Despite these difficulties, Heredia maintained an intense rhythm of intellectual activity during his months in New York; arguably, this was to be the most productive phase of his poetic career. Between November

1823 and September 1825, he composed such major works as “A Emilia,” “Placeres de la Melancolía,” and his signature work, “Niágara.” The last of these, composed at the falls, and the aforementioned “En el teocalli de Cholula,” are the two poems that have secured Heredia an essential place in the canon of Spanish American literature. He expressed his civic sensibilities, shaped now by the experience of living in a free republic, in compositions like “A Washington,” perhaps composed at Mount Vernon. His translations into Spanish of Ossian, Alfieri, and others reflected his expanded readings in world literature, especially of authors associated with international Romanticism. Heredia kept up to date with literary and other topics through English-language publications like the *North American Review*, and he frequented New York’s publishing houses and booksellers. Crowning these months of literary activity, in the summer of 1825 Heredia published the first collection of his works: *Poesías* (New York: Behr and Kahl). It is not surprising that he was able to publish his poetry in Spanish in the United States; a vigorous, often politically charged Spanish-language press existed in Philadelphia and New York in the 1820s.⁸ Through Domingo del Monte, copies of Heredia’s *Poesías* were to reach prominent readers and reviewers in the Spanish-speaking world, thus greatly expanding his literary reputation.

In December 1824, Heredia received word that the legal case against the *Soles y Rayos* conspirators had been decided, and that he was among those sentenced to banishment from Cuba and exile to Spain. The doors to his homeland now officially closed, and with the prospect of continued difficulties living in the United States, Heredia left for Mexico in August 1825. The recently elected President Guadalupe Victoria—Mexico’s first after the adoption of the Constitution of 1824—had offered Heredia a passport for his relocation to the new republic. En route, catching sight of Cuban shores from the rail of his ship, he penned another signature poem, “Himno del desterrado.” By mid-October, he was welcomed in Mexico City by Victoria, who would offer him his patronage during his four-year term in office. Heredia was given a position in the government’s *Secretaría de Estado* and would go on to serve in judicial posts in the State of Mexico, as a *diputado* in that state’s congress, and in significant positions in cultural and educational institutions.

In 1827, Heredia married Jacoba Yáñez, the daughter of an old friend of his father in Mexico, and they began a family. His literary activity continued unabated, even if his most innovative and productive years as a poet already were behind him. His adaptations of French tragedies were

performed in Mexico; he edited and published several literary journals, to which he contributed reviews, essays, stories, and poetry; and he advanced an ambitious intellectual project, his *Leciones de Historia Universal* (1831). In 1832, an expanded and revised edition of his *Poesías* was published in two volumes in the city of Toluca. In the preface to this edition, Heredia noted the changes of fortune and occupation that he had undergone at his young age:

The whirlwind of revolution has forced me to traverse, in a short time, a vast distance, and at age twenty-five I have been, with greater or lesser success, a lawyer, a soldier, a traveler, a language professor, a diplomat, a journalist, a magistrate, a historian and a poet. All my writings surely have suffered because of the strange volatility of my fate. (*Poesías* 1832, 1, 4)

In the 1830s, Heredia was caught up in the chaos that plagued Mexico after Victoria's presidency; on more than one occasion he was compelled to take up arms in favor of one faction or another. It seems that he was subject to suspicion and persecution from all sides. As a Cuban, he still was technically a Spanish subject, and therefore some questioned his loyalty to the Mexican republic. As an outspoken defender of democratic liberalism and the rule of law, he ran afoul of many in this period of aggressive political opportunism in Mexico. Moreover, Heredia's troubles with Spanish authorities in Cuba only worsened; he was accused of association with the *Gran Legión del Águila Negra* conspiracy of the late 1820s, another pro-Cuban independence plot linked to freemasonry and based in Mexico. This time the colonial government in Cuba sentenced Heredia to death and the confiscation of his possessions, which made his dream of a return to his native island all the more improbable. His placement in Mexican government and judicial posts at a young age did not endear him to all, and his career path was often blocked. This had serious financial consequences for Heredia and his growing family, as did the irregular payment of government salaries in situations of near-anarchy. His health was delicate, as was that of his wife, and the couple lost three of their six children to childhood diseases.⁹

Heredia's prospects for reunion with his mother and sisters brightened when the widow of Ferdinand VII, María Cristina de Borbón, acting as regent, issued an amnesty decree for Spanish political exiles. While the terms of the decree alone were not sufficient for Heredia to return to

Cuba, they did inspire him to seek permission to do so. In 1836, through direct contact with the island's governor, Captain General Miguel Tacón, Heredia was granted a two-month visit. Leaving Jacoba and their children in Mexico, Heredia arrived in Havana in November 1836 and stayed, mostly in Matanzas, until January 1837. Upon his return to Mexico, he faced continued difficulties: declining health, the loss of a government post because of a new requirement that its holders be native-born Mexicans, and the failure of the government to pay salaries owed to functionaries, leaving the Heredia family in even more dire financial straits. Heredia's final months were spent scraping by, and on May 7, 1839, at age thirty-five, he finally succumbed to the consumptive illness that had plagued him since his teens. His widow and children moved to Cuba in 1844, where Jacoba died within a month, leaving her two daughters and one son in the care of her mother-in-law and the extended Heredia family.

Heredia and Exile

Heredia's death inspired an elegy by the Cuban poet Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814–1873), whose “A la muerte del célebre poeta cubano D. José María Heredia” (1841) addresses Cuba and asks:

Who will sing your breezes and your palm trees,
Your fiery sun, your brilliant sky?
[. . .]
He clamored for you in his cruel exile,
And now perfidious fortune condemns
His cold remains in foreign soil to lie . . .¹⁰

For Cubans of his and later generations, Heredia was the poet who first and most vividly expressed a sense of Cuban nationhood, linked indissolubly to the island's landscapes and to the poet's exilic condition. For it was from the distance of his *destierro* that Heredia evoked, in his imagination and from the depths of his ethical and political consciousness, a homeland that combined, in his words, “of the natural world, loveliness, / of the moral world, depravity” (“The Exile's Hymn,” included herein).

The degree to which Heredia's verses were an inspiration for pro-independence Cubans of his generation cannot be overstated. The phenomenon was recorded by Cuban writer Cirilo Villaverde (1812–1894)

in his antislavery novel *Cecilia Valdés*, first published in 1839. In a passage that explains the grip that censorship had on Cuba in the 1820s and 1830s, and the efforts of Félix Varela and others to incite independence sentiments on the island through journalistic writings from abroad, Villaverde notes the far greater impact of Heredia's poetry:

The patriotic verses of that famous poet exercised a greater and more general influence on the minds of youth. . . . His "Himno del desterrado" of 1825 aroused keen enthusiasm in Havana; many learned it by heart and a goodly number repeated it whenever the occasion came their way to do so without endangering their personal freedom.¹¹

Not only did Heredia's patriotic poems become instant classics; the poet himself soon acquired a halo of martyrdom. To a considerable degree this was self-generated; it arose from his poems that linked longing for his homeland, self-pity for his exilic state, patriotic fervor, and the fantasy of dying a hero's death in the battle for Cuban independence. Even close friends like Del Monte, it seems, clung to the idea of Heredia as the exiled poet-martyr, a figure of both passion and pathos. This idea could lead only to disappointment when more complex reality impinged upon the idealized image, burnished by distance, that they had of him.

That reality is revealed in Heredia's letters, which give a more tangled view of his political sentiments and his life in exile. When Heredia fled Cuba in late 1823 as authorities were rounding up members of the *Soles y Rayos de Bolívar* groups, mutual incriminations and efforts at self-exculpation among the conspirators were common. Perhaps induced by a combination of principle and panic, on the eve of his escape Heredia composed a letter to Francisco Hernández Morejón, the primary judge in the legal proceedings against the *Caballeros Racionales*. In this letter (included herein), Heredia claimed that he had broken with that group almost a year before. Moreover, he asserted, when he was associated with the *Caballeros*, they only had "endeavored peacefully to prepare public opinion for independence." He conceded that others in the conspiracy may have had darker intentions—alluding to "civil war" and perhaps hinting at a slave revolt—but he had no direct knowledge of it. The tone and content of the letter diverge considerably from that of Heredia's militantly patriotic verse. In it one hears not the firebrand poet, but the young lawyer hoping to influence the outcome of his case by carefully parsing

his views and actions. The letter was soon published, and was not well received by some in Heredia's circle.¹²

A similar ambivalence can be detected in the personal letters that Heredia wrote during his New York exile. When expressing his political and personal convictions, he is by turns defiant and tepid, steadfast and disillusioned, self-pitying and self-aggrandizing. The complexity of his sentiments is exemplified in a letter he wrote to his Uncle Ignacio in February 1824, while he was still awaiting word of the resolution of his case:

I am convinced that our fellow men are not worthy of the sacrifices that one makes for them; but the harm has already been done, and at the end of the day it is a beautiful and sublime thing to be a martyr for the human race, for having committed an error common to generous souls in all times and places, an error that, like me, befell Demosthenes, Cato and Washington.

However, the disillusionment that I have acquired will serve to help me reform my conduct in future, and if justice is done me, I will go back over to your faction, at least until the next life shows me that there is some greater or lesser chance of perfectibility, since, having lived in Matanzas and New York, I know there is little chance of that on this earth.

It would seem that a number of things contributed to this ambivalence: realization of the full consequences of his actions, the collapse of solidarity among the *Caballeros*, the stress of life in exile, and greater experience in a world of flawed social and political arrangements. At the same time, personal letters like this are of limited value as reflections of Heredia's truest feelings; they were not official statements of political opinion, but expressions of a transient state of mind. Moreover, like any letter writer, Heredia took into consideration the viewpoints and sensibilities of his addressee—in this case, those of a respected uncle who evidently was not quite on the same political page as his nephew. To this must be added the fact that Heredia knew that some of his letters were being intercepted by the authorities in Cuba, which required him to be extremely careful about what he wrote. He needed to protect himself while his legal case was still pending and to avoid incriminating those to whom or about whom he was writing.

These factors must explain the lacunae in Heredia's letters regarding aspects of his life in New York. For example, he names most of his fellow expatriates sparingly and innocuously, as roommates, traveling companions, and so on. He alludes a few times to the former delegates to the Spanish *Cortes*, Tomás Gener and Leonardo Santos Suárez, but does not mention the formidable political visionary Félix Varela at all. Nor does Heredia speak of the Argentine José Antonio Miralla, who also fled Cuba for New York in 1823 because of his implication in pro-independence activities, and with whom, we know from other contexts, Heredia almost certainly engaged during his time in that city. Only Antonio Betancourt, one of the three *Caballeros Racionales* who implicated Heredia as a prominent member of the group and thus precipitated the order for his arrest, receives more expansive treatment in Heredia's letters. Betancourt turned up in New York one month after Heredia's arrival, and Heredia is acerbic, if ultimately magnanimous, in his depiction of him. The freeness with which he portrays Betancourt suggests that Heredia saw no need to shield a man by whom he considered himself betrayed.

Besides soft-pedaling his interactions with current or former political agitators, in his letters Heredia assured his mother that he was keeping safely away from political writings and activities. It is difficult to determine if that was entirely true. In a February 1824 letter to Ignacio, Heredia describes his daily routine with this tantalizing passage:

I am up with the birds at eight, have breakfast at eight-thirty, and if there is no rain or snow, I go out at nine-thirty or ten. I wander around, here and there, until three o'clock, when I return for lunch. I go back out at four, until teatime at seven, after which, if the night is mild, I go out to visit some friend, or to visit with due precaution some mathematical conventicle, but almost always I remain at home studying or writing, have supper at ten, and turn in at eleven. I regularly walk five or six miles when I go out.

The casual allusion to the "mathematical conventicle" visited with "due precaution" easily escapes notice. The phrase may imply that Heredia was quietly attending meetings of Freemasons in New York. Given the masonic character of the *Caballeros Racionales* of which he had been a member and of the *Gran Legión del Águila Negra* with which later he may

have been involved, Heredia's association with freemasonry is undeniable even if its extent and duration is not well documented.¹³ In any case, the cryptic reference in Heredia's letter may indicate that, through such networks, he engaged in pro-Cuban independence intrigue during his months in New York.

A full assessment of the evolution of Heredia's political views during his subsequent exile in Mexico would be a complex task. Certainly in republican Mexico, with his fate already sealed vis-à-vis the colonial authorities in Cuba, he felt freer to speak his mind on political matters. The 1832 edition of his poetry published in Toluca restored some of the more incendiary verses that he had suppressed in the 1825 New York edition, and he remained vocal and eloquent as essayist, orator, and delegate. Yet his personal letters suggest that he fell victim to considerable disillusionment in the last decade of his life, even as he strove to maintain the highest degree of probity as a magistrate and participant in Mexican politics. Given the prolonged turmoil that he witnessed in Mexico, and the material adversity that this caused Heredia and his young family, it is hard to imagine how he could have avoided bitterness and skepticism about the prospects for successful republican government in Spanish America.

This provides a context for a second controversial letter that Heredia wrote in April 1836. In it, he asked the governor of Cuba, Captain General Miguel Tacón, for permission to visit his family on the island. The letter contains the following passage:

It is true that twelve years ago, the independence of Cuba was the most fervent of my vows, and that in order to achieve it I would have sacrificed happily my life's blood. But the calamities and misfortunes that I have witnessed for the past eight years have greatly modified my opinions, and today I would regard as criminal any attempt to transplant to fortunate and opulent Cuba the ills that afflict the American continent.¹⁴

Heredia could not have been more explicit in his disavowal of his former pro-independence sentiments, and a number of his old acquaintances on the island reacted as one might expect. When he arrived in Cuba, Heredia was largely shunned by Del Monte and others, whose correspondence gives a sense of just how displeased they were. In a letter to Heredia, Del Monte called him a "fallen angel," and in a letter to another of their group,

Del Monte reported that Heredia had “lost his immense patriotic-poetic prestige to such a degree that the young people [of the island] avoided seeing and having dealings with him.”¹⁵ Del Monte’s wording confirms the extent to which Heredia, from the convenient distance of exile, had become an iconic figure for the younger, progressive sector in Cuba. As such, he was expected to be pure and unwavering in his patriotic fervor and, in a sense, in his suffering and martyrdom.

The dissatisfaction that Del Monte and others of his generation felt with the real, complex, and contradictory José María Heredia has echoed in twentieth- and twenty-first century biographies and commentaries. Scholars often have felt compelled either to excuse or reproach him for his perceived apostasy in his letters to Hernández Morejón in 1823 and to Tacón in 1836. As in Heredia’s lifetime, the poet has continued to precede and preempt the man; the fiery zeal of his verses can still tempt readers to a sympathetic identification bordering on hero worship, and from there to disappointment with a more complicated reality. Perhaps only those who have suffered prolonged displacement can view Heredia’s actions as a consequence of the impossible choices imposed by exile itself, rather than through a lens of moral judgment.

Heredia as Travel Writer

Between November 1829 and March 1830, a series of travel letters that Heredia wrote to his Uncle Ignacio appeared in a journal for women published by Domingo del Monte in Havana: *La Moda o Recreo Semanal del Bello Sexo*. Del Monte provided a preface to the first installment, announcing the series and reminding his readers of the literary prestige of the author:

Merely by mentioning the name *Heredia*, we are sure to spark the interest of our amiable subscribers. The *Cuban poet*, whose beautiful compositions are known by heart by nearly all *Habaneros* with any level of education, and whose fame now extends to Europe, wrote the letters from which we have extracted these fragments during his residence in the United States in 1823 and 1824. He did not write them to be published, but rather to give a friend of his an idea of that country. Therefore it should be no surprise that in

these letters one finds the occasional negligence of style which, admittedly, is a sure sign of friendship and trust. Despite this, and the fact that these letters are written in *humble prose*, it will not be forgotten that their author is the sublime singer of Niagara and of the tempests of the torrid zone, especially when some grandiose object appears before him and arouses the genius to which, to the glory of his homeland, is owed works of such felicitous inspiration.¹⁶

A comparison of the letters adapted for *La Moda* with their originals reveals that Del Monte eliminated their personal content—including any reference to Ignacio Heredia as addressee—and lightly revised them for style.¹⁷ In edited form, these letters, originally written to amuse Ignacio during tranquil afternoons in his coffee grove, became minutely descriptive travelogues, composed with considerable stylistic polish despite Del Monte's fussy claims to the contrary. While it is not clear if Heredia knew that, through his uncle and his friend, his letters would appear in print, their quality suggests that he had publication at least in the back of his mind.

The letters describe Heredia's sea voyage from Cuba, the city of Boston, his trip to Philadelphia in April 1824 with passages on the New Jersey estate of Joseph Bonaparte and the city of New York, and his visit to New Haven, Connecticut, and environs. But the most remarkable series of travel letters are those that Heredia wrote between June 7 and June 17, 1824, recounting his trip to Niagara Falls. These letters take the reader from the streets of New York, up the Hudson River valley by steamship to Albany and Troy, and across the interior of New York State by stagecoach and canal boat to the Niagara frontier. Heredia notes historical curiosities, aspects of American culture and character, and advances in technology, transportation, and communications. He includes the occasional amusing anecdote; for all his seriousness of purpose and careful cataloguing of what he saw, Heredia, accompanied by friend Juan de Acosta, had sheer fun on this trip.

The Niagara letters are striking in their evocation of the beauty of the landscapes along the way, culminating in a rapturous description of the falls. They are important complements to Heredia's signature poem "Niágara," showing a similar gift for vivid description, the same penchant for emotional identification with nature and melancholy introspection, and the same preoccupation with the natural sublime. In fact, the word *sublime*, dear to Romantic sensibilities, echoes insistently throughout the

letters and the poem. Along with its companion term *picturesque*, the word was becoming intimately linked with the landscapes of New York State: the Hudson Valley; the Catskill Mountains, which provided a conveniently proximate “wilderness”; the deeply forested interior of the state, which was opening to settlement; and of course Niagara itself. Admired as the most spectacular natural attraction in North America before the wonders of the Far West became widely known, the falls were, at the time of Heredia’s journey in 1824, increasingly accessible to travelers from the Eastern Seaboard. Heredia followed a route that already was hallowed by travel writers, novelists, and poets, and which, beginning just a year later with Thomas Cole, would inspire the Hudson River School of landscape painters.¹⁸

Heredia prepared for his trip by reading widely. He consulted geography books, atlases, and travel guides. For his discussion of the Erie Canal, he cites articles from the *North American Review*, which he carried with him on his journey. He also had at hand John Howison’s *Sketches of Upper Canada* (1821), from which he quotes at length for the description of the falls, translating into Spanish. More broadly, Heredia’s readings in international Romanticism preceded and even shaped his journey. François-René de Chateaubriand’s novel *Atala* (1801), which drew on that author’s travels in North America in 1791, appears to have been a major influence. In a letter written a month before his trip, Heredia advised his mother to tell his sister Ignacia to read the description of the falls in that novel; he mentions in a letter from Niagara that Chateaubriand’s description of the Niagara River is both beautiful and accurate; and scholars have traced specific influences of Chateaubriand’s text on Heredia’s verse “Niágara.” It is telling that *Atala*’s idealized and sentimentalized rendering of the North American wilderness was present in Heredia’s mind. It suggests the degree to which his trip was motivated by things beyond the curiosity of the average tourist—things that the Romantic aesthetic and vision of life emphasized, like the search for the exotic and the primitive, and a yearning for extreme sensation.

But the journey to Niagara in 1824 was a far cry from that of 1791. The New York State interior, which thirty years before had been a wilderness crossed by rough roads, populated by Native Americans and dotted by forts, now was becoming settled farmland, with towns springing up along the banks of the Erie Canal, as Heredia puts it, “as if by magic.” What had been a bone-jarring stagecoach journey taking weeks was now a relatively comfortable trip by packet boat taking just a few days.

Heredia reveled in the ease and speed of his trip, and his letters discuss the canal as a great work of engineering and a transformative conduit for the movement of people and goods. Besides its commercial function, the canal was now part of a larger tourist infrastructure—the first in the United States—which included Hudson River steamboats with regular service, hotels in the Catskills and in spas north of Albany, and facilities for visitors at Niagara. The packet boats that plied the canal were floating hotels, from which one could watch varied sights drift by while eating off imported English china, as Heredia notes. At Niagara, one could pass the night at one of the comfortable new hotels or have refreshments and play billiards at an establishment just a short stroll from the edge of the precipice. Heredia is matter-of-fact in noting such amenities, accepting that the trip to Niagara was becoming less an adventure for the intrepid and more an excursion for the ordinary tourist.

Thus, although Heredia's imagination was roused by a Romantic vision of the American wilderness, and he was able to give free rein to this vision in his verse "Niágara" and in passages of the corresponding letters, his understanding of the United States was also pragmatic and forward looking. He saw that the young nation was undergoing rapid demographic and technological change, and that advances in transportation and communications were "overthrowing the tyranny of distance" in the westward-expanding republic.¹⁹ The Erie Canal was for him a striking example of the economic and technological development that was achievable in a republic of free citizens.²⁰ He was the direct beneficiary of the burgeoning publication and journalistic industries in the United States of the 1820s; his access to books in diverse languages in New York, and his opportunity to publish his own works there in his native Spanish, had a significant effect upon his literary trajectory. His letters take note of institutions of higher learning and culture, like Yale College and the Philadelphia Museum, and even of humbler indicators of the diffusion of literacy and culture in the American hinterland, like the curious library boat that plied the Erie Canal.

Heredia's admiration for the United States was clearly influenced by individual Americans he knew. While his difficulties with English and other challenges during his stay prevented him from completely overcoming his outsider status, he had amiable associations with people like the skipper who loaned him warm clothing on the voyage to Boston and remained an important ally, the New York bookbinders and booksellers whose shops he haunted, and the shipping merchants on whose services he depended

for communication with home. Heredia must have been on very good terms as well with his students at the school where he taught Spanish for a few months. His New York edition of *Poesías* includes a brief preface in English expressing hope that the volume will help Americans learn Spanish, a “little service of an exiled youth,” offered as “an expression of gratitude for the asylum he has found in this happy country!”

Indeed, such friendly acquaintances helped Heredia to view the culture and character of his country of refuge in an almost unfailingly positive light. His letters suggest a special appreciation for what he perceived as the pragmatism and unflappability of Americans. He notes their capacity for organizing for action in a peaceable and autonomous way, whether fighting fires in Philadelphia or protesting politically in New York. He observes a keen sense of justice and egalitarianism in the Americans around him, evident in his anecdotes of the New York demonstration against the wrong done to DeWitt Clinton,²¹ and the reprimand given to the expatriate Joseph Bonaparte by his proletarian New Jersey neighbors. Such examples seem to reflect Heredia’s belief in the beneficial effect that republican governments have on the private and civic virtue of individual citizens. He was charmed as well by the neoclassical confections by which the young United States gestured toward an imagined august past: a bank building in Philadelphia that replicated the Parthenon; backwoods towns in upstate New York that carried lofty names from antiquity, like Utica, Rome, Syracuse, and Palmyra.

Heredia’s observations of the American character were not without touches of ironic detachment. His letters offer a few trenchant anecdotes of Yankee competitiveness—for example, that of a frantic and pointless race between canal boat captains—and shrewdness in business dealings. But in general his letters show a disinclination to overtly criticize any important aspect of American life and culture. For example, despite the anti-slavery sentiments that he expressed elsewhere,²² his extant letters make no mention of slavery in the United States. In a letter of June 1824, while describing the pleasant landscapes along the Erie Canal, he writes: “At the same time that I admired them with pleasure, I felt free of the iron hand that pressed my heart in the fields of Cuba when I remembered that their bounty was born of the sweat, at times of the blood, of so many miserable slaves.” While it was true that the small family farms of upstate New York did not depend upon massive use of slave labor like in the American South, Heredia surely knew that slavery existed in the United States. Indeed, the state of New York would not definitively abolish it

until 1827. Yet he was silent on this matter, as he was on other social and economic ills that he must have witnessed during his North American stay. His cherished ideal of republican government and its moral benefits may have compelled him to omit any discrepant elements. Especially in his travel letters, which he perhaps knew might be published in Cuba, he may have desired to present such an idealized image of the United States as an example for Spanish American nations as they attempted to forge an emancipated future.

Heredia and Nineteenth-Century Inter-American Literary Relations

In a letter of June 29, 1825, Heredia told his mother that he was sending along three copies of his *Poesías*, just off the New York presses, and that another batch would soon be on its way to Cuba. Fewer than six weeks later, an anonymous review of the book appeared in Spanish in the *New York American* newspaper.²³ In a preface to the review, the editors explained that they were publishing “the critique, as it was communicated for this paper, without, as [they] first thought of doing, translating it,” noting that “those whose knowledge of the Spanish would enable them to relish the extracts from [the] poems” contained in the review “would also like to read in the same tongue the opinions which a Spaniard entertains of them.” The review, evidently written by someone who knew Heredia’s circumstances very well, is unreserved in its praise. It ends with the following wish: “May fortune treat him more kindly; but in the honorable expatriation occasioned by his constant, generous efforts on behalf of liberty, and amidst all the troubles that the enemies of his homeland may cause him, he should be as sure of the appreciation of good men as he is of the hatred of despots.” The editors echoed the reviewer’s praise: “We willingly add our testimony to that of the writer of the critique, as to the merits of this little volume, which we have read with much gratification. There are throughout, in the poems which compose it, traits of the truest genius . . .”

That summer of 1825 saw Heredia engaged in another work for publication: a translation of the speech that Massachusetts congressman and famed orator Daniel Webster delivered at the Bunker Hill monument in Boston on June 17, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the iconic Revolutionary War battle. The speech celebrated not only