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Three Poets' Contribution to the Poetic Genre of Spanish-American Literature

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THREE POETS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE POETIC GENRE
OF SPANISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

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VITA

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PREFACE

Auturo Torres Río-Seco, in his book, The Epic of Latin American Literature, says:

Without assuming the role of an augur it is permissible to point out a new movement which is encouraging for the future of Spanish American poetry. This is the emergence in the last few years of a highly original genre: Negro Verse. That is to say poetry on Negro themes using Negro rhythms and composed by members of both African and Spanish descent.¹

He further states that the two figures who have become best known as the highest exponents of this new poetry, are Nicolás Guillén and Emilio Ballagas.

However, if one would but consult the most eminent critic, Menéndez y Pelayo, he would find in his Antología de Poetas Hispano-Americanos a discussion on two earlier poets, one of whom wrote in the colonial period, the other in the romantic. I speak of José Manuel Valdés, the great Peruvian mulatto, and Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, the Cuban.

These men were victims of innumerable obstacles. Yet, their difficult environmental situation, the unendurable humiliation to which in those times a mulatto was subjected, the prevalence of misfortune and injustice--all these, plus

¹ Auturo Torres Río-Seco, The Epic of Latin American Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939) p. 127.

an undaunted love for God and his righteousness, were stepping stones rather than stumbling blocks to greatness.

Since this type of verse was in existence prior to the appearance of the Afro-Spanish accomplishments of Guillén and his contemporaries, the writer felt, when selecting a topic for graduate research, that there was not only enough material to warrant a study of these poets, but also that some information and findings concerning them might emerge which would be informative and stimulating not only to the student of Spanish, but in any field of the arts.

It is the purpose of this study, then, to survey the life and major works of three Negro Latin American poets: José Manuel Valdés, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, and Nicolás Guillén.

INTRODUCTION

All that is original in Negro folklore can be traced to the economic institution of slavery, which, for generations, was the lot of nine-tenths of the Negro population.

The Negro lived in America as a slave for over two hundred forty years. He was forced by the system of slavery into habits of life and forms of behavior that, inevitably, drove him into the direction of emotional escape and religious delirium. Existence offered him nothing for which to hope but endless labor and pain. Life was a continuous escape. He accepted, as a result, another world of unreality. It was an expression of this escape which is symbolic in the literature. The verses of the spirituals and first poetic attempts have far more than the ordinary Christian zeal embodied in them. "They are the aching, poignant cry of an entire people."²

Curiously, these early fragments have a primitive kinship to the old Spanish ballads, which is striking on close comparison with these old romances. There are incremental repetitions, simple human descriptions of episodes from life, humorous or gruesome stories, some references to the Eternal Father, and usually a moral or two.

²V. C. Calverton, Anthology of Negro Literature (New York: Modern Library, 1929), p. 5.

Compare the repetition of an early Negro poem with that of an anonymous ancient verse from the Spanish. Both embody religious zeal, which appears, again and again, in every genre of Spanish and Negro Literature.

Deep River

Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
 Deep river, Lord,
 I want to cross over into campground,
 Lord, I want to cross over into campground,
 Lord, I want to cross over into campground.

Oh, chillun,
 Don't you want to go, to that gospel feast,
 That promised land, that land, where all is
 peace?
 Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into
 campground.
 I want to cross over into campground.³

And from the Spanish:

Let Us Go to Bethlehem Now

Carry me, Babe, to Bethlehem now
 For I would look on Thee my God
 Thou art alone my goal and Thou
 Thou to that goal the only road.

From my deep slumber bid me wake,
 Call me, no evil shall betide me,
 Give me Thy heavenly hand to guide me
 And I shall not heaven's way mistake
 So shall I straight to Bethlehem go,
 Where I shall look on Thee, my God,
 Thou art alone my goal and Thou

³ Calverton, op. cit., p. 220.

Thou to that goal my only road.⁴

Compare a stanza or two of Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem of folk-life, A Banjo Song, with a fragment of a ballad which relates an incident from the state of society existing in Spain between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Those were days of Spanish and Moorish conflicts.

A Banjo Song

'Bout de time dat night is fallin'
 An my daily wu'k is done,
 An above de shady hilltops
 I can see de settin' sun;
 When de quiet, restful shadders
 Is beginning jes to fall,
 Den I take de little banjo
 F'om its place upon de wall.

Den my family gadders roun' me
 In de fadin' o' de light
 Ez I strike de strings to try 'em
 Ef dey all is tuned er-right.
 An' it seems we're so nigh heaven
 We kin hyeah de angels sing
 When de music o' dat banjo
 Sets my cabin all er-ring.⁵

And the romancero:

Yo mera mora Morayma,
 Morilla d'un bel catar;
 Cuytada, por me enganar.
 Hablome en algaravia,
 Como aquel que la bien save:

⁴ John Bouring, Ancient Poetry and Romances of Spain
 (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1824), p. 9.

⁵ Calverton, op. cit., p. 221.

"A_bras me las puertas, Mora,
 Si Alá te guarde de mal"
 "Como te abriré, mezquina,
 Que no sé quien tú serás?"
 "Yo soy el Moro Macote,
 Hermano de la tu madre,
 Que un Christiano dejó muerto;
 Tras mi venia el alcalde.
 Sino me abres tú, mi vida,
 Aquí me veras matar."
 Quando esto oy, cuytada,
 Comenceme a levantar;
 Vistierame vn almexia
 No hallando mi brial;
 Fuerame para la puerta,
 Y abril de par en par.⁶

One finds, in each, simplicity and a tender depiction of the society of that time.

On comparing episodes from Spain's early wars with such poems as Memphis, a tragic folk-poem written by a genius of folk-value, A. Sterling Brown, one finds certain calamitous elements. The fragment from Memphis is compared with one from the ballad, La Numancia, on which Cervantes drew for his drama of the same name.

Memphis

Ninevah, Tyre,
 Babylon,
 Not much lef'
 Of either one.
 All dese cities
 Ashes and rust
 De wind sings sperrichals
 Through deir dus'

⁶ George Ticknor, History of Spanish Literature (New York: Harper Brothers, 1849), I, p. 123.

Was another Memphis
 'Mongst de olden days,
 Done been destroyed
 In many ways.
 Dis here Memphis
 It may go.
 Floods may drown it,
 Tornado blow,
 Mississippi wash it
 Down to sea
 Like de other Memphis in
 History.⁷

De Como Cipion Destruyo a Numancia

Enojada estaba Roma
 de este pueblo soriano;
 envía que le castigue,
 a Cipión el Africano.
 Sabiendo los de Numancia.
 Que en España había llegado,
 con esfuerzo varonil
 lo esperaban en el campo.
 A los primeros encuentros
 Cipión de ha retirado;
 mas, volviendo a la batalla,
 reciamente ha peleado.
 Romanos son vencedores,
 sobre los de Soria han dado:
 matan casi los más de ellos,
 los otros se han encerrado.
 Metidos en la ciudad
 Cipión los ha cercado,
 púsoles estancias fuertes,
 y un foso desaforado;
 y tanto les tuvo el cerco
 que el comer les ha faltado.
 púsoles en tanto estrecho,
 que al fin han determinado
 de matar toa la gente
 que ni tome arma en mano.
 Ponen fuego a la ciudad,
 ardiendo de cabo a cabo,
 y ellos dan en el real

⁷ Calverton, op. cit., p. 258.

con ^{ánimo} anímo denodado;
 pero al fin todos murieron,
 que ninguno ha entrado.⁸

Humor is indigenous to the literature of both (the)
 races.

Compare the charming ballad in which an elder sister is
 represented lecturing to a younger one, on first noticing in
 her the symptoms of love, with Dunbar's When Malinda Sings:

Riño con Juanilla
 Su hermana Miguela;
 Palabras le dize,
 Que mucho le duelan:
 "Ayer en mantillas
 Andauas pequeña,
 Oy, andas galana
 Mas que otras donzellas
 Tu gozo es supiros
 Tu cantar endechas;
 Al alua madrugas,
 Muy tarde te acuestas;
 Quando estás labrando,
 No sé en que te piensas,
 Al dechado miras,
 Y los puntas yerras.
 Dizenme que hazes.
 Amororsas señas:
 Si madre lo sabe:
 Aura cosas nuevas.
 Clauará ventanas,
 Cerrará las puertas;
 Para que baylemos,
 No dara licencia;
 Mandará que tía
 Nos lleue a la Yglesia
 Porque no nos hablen
 Las amigas nuestras.
 Cuando fuera salga,
 Dírale a la duena.

⁸ Alfonso Escudero, Romancero Español (Santiago: Editorial
 Nascimento, 1939), pp. 123-4.

Que con nuestros ojos
 Tenga mucha cuenta;
 Que mire quien passa;
 Si miro a la reja,
 Y qual de de nosotras
 Boluio la cabeca.
 Por tus libertades
 Seré yo sugeta;
 Pagarmemos justos
 Lo que malos pecan."
 "Ay Miguela hermana
 Que mal que sospechas
 Mis males presumes,
 Y no los aciertas,
 A Pedro el de Juan
 Que se fue a la guerra
 Afición le tuue,
 Y escuche sus quexas;
 Más visto que es vario
 Mediante el ausencia,
 De su fe fingida
 Ya no se me acuerda.
 Fingida la llamo,
 Porque quién se ausenta,
 Sin fuerca y con gusto,
 No es bién que le quiera."
 "Ruegale tu a Dios
 Que Pedro no buelua"
 Respondía burlando
 Su hermana Miguela
 "Que el amor comprado
 Con tan ricas prendas
 No saldra del alma
 Sin salir con ella.
 Creciendo tus años.
 Crecerán tus peñas;
 Y si no la saves,
 Escucha esta letra:
 Si eres nina y has amor,
 Que haras quando mayor?"⁹

This ballad gives a true representation of Spanish life.
 There is an attractive simplicity of thought and expression,

⁹ Ticknor, op. cit., p. 152.

which is united to a sort of mischievous shrewdness.

One finds the same qualities in evidence in the jocular offering by the Negro poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar.

When Malinda Sings

G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy
 Put day music book away;
 What's de use to keep on trying?
 Ef you practice twell you're gray,
 You can't sta't no notes a-flying
 Lak de ones dat rants and rings
 From the kitchen to de big woods
 When Malinda sings.

You ain't got de nachel o'gans
 Fu' to make de soun' come right,
 You ain't got de tun'ns and twistin's
 Fu' to make it sweet an' light.
 Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,
 An' I'm tellin' you fu' true,
 When hit comes to raal right singin',
 Tain't no easy thing to do.

Easy 'nough fu' folks to hollah,
 Lookin' at de lines an' dots,
 When dey ain't no one kin sense it,
 An' de chune comes in, in spots;
 But fu' real melojous music,
 Dat jes' strikes yo' hea't and clings,
 Jes' you stan' an' listen wif me
 When Malindy sings.

Towsah, stop dat ba'kin', hyeah me
 Mandy, mek dat chile keep still;
 Don't you hyeah de echoes callin'
 F'om de valley to de hill?
 Let me liste, I can hyeah it,
 Th'oo de bresh of angels' wings,
 Sof' an' sweet, "Swing low, Sweet Chariot,"
 Ez Malindy sings.¹⁰

¹⁰ Calverton, op. cit., p. 182.

Note the repetitious line and the allusions to God in this portrayal of Negro life.

For a final comparison, consider two love poems. Each has the graceful lyricism and emotion so characteristic of the two races. Again, one finds, on observation, a warm genuine episode from life and incremental repetition.

Rosa Fresca, Rosa Fresca

"Rosa Fresca, Rosa fresca
Tan garrida y con amor;
Quando yos tuve en mis brazos
No vos supe servir, no!
Y agora quos serviria
No vos puedo aver, no!"

"Vuestra fue la culpa amigo,
Embiastes me una carta
Con un vuestro servidor
Y en lugar de recaudar,
El dixera otra razon:
Querades casado, amigo
Alla en tierras de Leon,
Que teneis muger hermosa,
Y hijos como una flor."
"Quien os lo dixo, Senora
No vos dixo verdad, no
Que yo nunca entre en Castilla
Ni alla en tierras de Leon,
Si no quando era pequeno,
Que no sabia de amor."¹¹

And:

¹¹ Ticknor, op. cit., p. 124.

A Love Song

Angelina

Angelina steps so gently, Angelina bows so low
 An' she lif' huh sku't so dainty dat huh shoe-
 top skacely show;
 Go way, people, d'ain't nothah sich a lady in
 de lan'
 When she's movin' thoo de figgers er a'dani by
 huh'self
 Foks jes' stan' stock still a-starin' an dey
 mos' nigh hols dey bref
 An' de young mens, dey's a sayin' "I's gwine
 mek dat damsel mine,"
 When Angelina Johnson comes a-swingin' down de
 line.¹²

Another heritage-rhythm is found in the very earliest poetic contributions to the present time. These rhythms often vivify the mundane abandon of the race.

Yet, it is contemporary Negro poetry with its serious art that can best represent the Negro of the present generation.

Even up to existing times, in spite of rapid assimilation of American standards and ways of life, phenomenal educational advancements, philanthropic interests, and help from a minority of the white population, "the general attitude of public opinion in America has set the Negro off to himself

¹² Newman White, Anthology of Negro Verse (Durham: Trinity College Press, 1924), p. 72.

as a class apart."¹³

He has been under an inconsistent ostracism from the beginning, even under the slave regime. American race prejudice has been capricious. While segregating the race socially, it has not done so culturally. Consequently, the race members have been typical Americans, with only a psychological sense of social difference, "since political participation and equal civic rights are the goal of its practical aspirations."¹⁴ Yet, this same social prejudice, which was meant to hamper the group, has turned out to be a great spiritual discipline and a cultural blessing in disguise. For it has preserved the Negro's sense of a peculiar folk solidarity, has preserved the folk-values, and has intensified the modes of self-expression. Valdés, Plácido, and Guillén have echoed these factors time and again in their literary contributions, as this study will show.

Historians and literary critics, like Altamira and Menendez y Pelayo, have proven that heroic achievements and centuries of fighting alien races and creeds have made all Spaniards brothers, with a forcible sense of race and nationality. Too, a nation which fought so many years for its

¹³ Alaine Locke, "The Negro in American Culture," cited by V. F. Calverton, Anthology of Negro Verse (New York: Modern Library, 1929), p. 249.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

religion prized it more highly than did any other country. "Spanish literature is strongly Roman Catholic. It is supreme in the domain of mysticism and devotion."¹⁵

In the case of the American Negro, too, the sense of race, religion, and nationality is strong and, consequently, reflective. It is only natural, then, that literature should give a direct portrayal of Negro folk-life and folk-types, with characteristic idioms of thought, feeling, and speech.

There is the poetry of emotional coloring, which reflects in a secondary way the tempo and moods of every day living, the vein that emphasizes the growing historical sense of a separate cultural tradition--a racialist trend that is equivalent to a nationalistic background, "in which the racial situation induces a personal reaction and a particular philosophy of life."¹⁶

Lastly, we have the vein which expresses the sense of a group and its common experiences--partly as a poetry of social protest, so spiritedly manifested in the works of the three poets being considered. These writers, partly through works of social exhortation and propaganda, directly capital-

¹⁵ George Northup, History of Spanish Literature, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), p. 16.

¹⁶ Locke, "The Negro in American Culture," cited by V. F. Calverton, op. cit., p. 253.

ize the situations and dilemmas of racial experiences. One has only to read Valdés' odes to Bolívar and San Martín, Plácido's sonnets, any one of Guillén's serious works on the Cuban's difficult situation and past history, to find the above factors evident.

An analysis, then, of American Negro literature brings forth a synthesis of concrete ideas. It embodies emotion, deep spirituality, quizzical humor, homely secular folklore, and a moodiness springing from the realization that a strange mystical being is imbedded in the Negro's soul. There is social forgiveness, intensity of feeling, compassion, and lyricism. The works begin and end in humanitarian and moral appeal. The poets plead for human rights, and their writings are filled with pathos, self-pity, and a fanatic love for God. Finally, they turn in bitter disillusionment to social protest and revolt.

Often many writers reflect their heritage in their literary contributions. Such has been the case with the Spanish American poets, José Manuel Valdés, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, and Nicolás Guillén, in whose works can be found many of the characteristics of both American Negro and Spanish literature.

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF NEGRO LATIN AMERICAN POETRY

In order to understand the poetry of the Spanish American people of that huge area embracing Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean Islands, one must realize that there are many fundamental differences which separate this culture from that of the United States.

Although Latin America had universities and the beginning of a literature almost a hundred years before North America had them, its economic and social development, as a result of geographical and political obstacles, had been retarded; and, today, the industrial revolution is still going on. On the other hand, national boundaries are sometimes artificial; and whole sections which are divided into separate nations are racially, economically, and culturally similar.

All this makes for a contradictory situation. While, on the one hand, regionalism flourishes and national pride seeks for indigenous artistic expression, on the other hand, "we find movements and trends which produce almost the same literary phenomena in various parts of the southern continent."¹⁷

¹⁷ H. R. Hays, 12 Spanish American Poets (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), p. 1.

Likewise, in respect to poetry, we find both individual national schools and, at the same time, a good deal of cultural interchange.

And, since Spanish is the language which unites the majority of the republics, there is really one poetic literature, to which first one country then another makes a contribution which affects the course of the movement.¹⁸

Latin America, however, has kept a closer contact with European cultural activities. Its poetry has inherited a more profound feeling of literary tradition and a greater sensitivity to world literature, and it has maintained a more sophisticated attitude.

One may say that Latin American poetry follows three general attitudes. There is, first, the complete withdrawal from most of the local poetry, which is really a part of European literature. Valdés is an exponent of this category. Then, there is a poetry concerned with provincial life, in which the writer generally expresses his dissatisfaction with the sterility and poverty of his environment. Plácido has done this in more than one of his works. Finally, there is the attempt to make use of national characteristics, which involves the use of local color and folklore. For the ability to portray the latter, Nicolás Guillén has been

¹⁸ Hays, op. cit., p. 2.

acclaimed one of the best.

Poetry in Latin America is, therefore, a significant cultural expression. From it, we may become familiar with "the people, their particular kinds of sensitivity, and their ways of thinking and feeling."¹⁹

A more permanent element affecting the poetic impulses under discussion is the racial variety. In the Latin American Republics, there are mixtures of whites, Indians, Negroes, mestizos, and mulattoes. It is the writer of both Negroid and Spanish heritage of which this thesis will concern itself. In recent years, intellectuals have ceased to regard those primitives as merely picturesque. Movements for social reform or revolution have sprung up under organized leadership. Together with this internal metamorphosis comes a reassertion of the cultural heritage of the primitive race, which, in turn, stimulates a literary movement. Generally, there has been a strong movement based on the folklore and the racial characteristics of the Negroes and mulattoes who make up a large percentage of the population. This Afro-Spanish school has depended for its inspiration upon dance forms, the legends incorporating the history of a race, popular songs, and many other national factors. This

¹⁹ Hays, op. cit., p. 3.

same school has succeeded in incorporating some lyrical dance forms, such as the Rhumba and the Son, into the new poetry, as well as melancholia, eroticism, and racial sensitivity. "Afro-Spanish poetry, then, comes quite near to creating a new original genre."²⁰

Negro verse, one may conclude, is not new, neither is it white nor black but a synthesis of African-Spanish elements; or to quote Juan Marinello, "Encontramos en el nuestro ayer, nuestro presente y y nuestro mañana."²¹ What, then, is Negro-Latin American poetry? If time permitted a survey of the Spanish temperament, as revealed in history and literature, one would find a harmonious picture. A brief enumeration of the characteristics of Spanish literature will suffice.

As in the Negro's art, Spain, by retaining and applying afresh her own simplicity and essential ideas and traditions, has imparted her finest spiritual gifts through her literary contributions to the entire world. The literature has its own special seal, the mark of a lofty and unique personality. Thankfully, it is carrying itself over into a

²⁰ Hays, op. cit., p. 5.

²¹ Juan Marinello, "Hazañas y Triunfo Americanos de Nicolás Guillén," Literatura Hispanoamericana, 6:223, May, 1937.

place where it shall be immortal.

The country's literature is democratic, individualistic, and, for the most part, undisciplined. It is imbued with highest ideals of valor and honor. Courtliness, elegance, and chivalry abound. Too, the works are filled with a human element, vivid description, and subtle humor. "It is racy of the soil and is, without the slightest dubiousness, the most colorful and, no less, the most influential of all other nations."²²

Negro Latin-American verse is, then on close observation, a color element--a blending of Negro and Spanish traditions--a fusion of certain ones of their racial elements. This results in a combination embodying both the heritages of one group and the heritages of another. These trends are both simple and complex in phrasing and somewhat traditional in rhyme and meter. Every available source, from variations on a Biblical work to some phase of local color, is used for a theme. Valdés has employed the first, while Guillén has used the second.

Yet, regardless of its subject matter, style of presentation, or meter, there is that evident dominance of two racial strains. Some attention will be focused upon these character-

²² George Northup, History of Spanish Literature, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), p. 20.

istics which result from a dual heritage, as they appear.

CHAPTER II
THE PERUVIAN MYSTIC POET,
JOSE MANUEL VALDES

A. LIFE

As early as the sixteenth century, priests such as Fathers Sandoval and Mercado had raised their voices against the act of slavery. Following the honored tradition of the Dominicans, many other religious groups deplored the evil traffic.

The end of the eighteenth century is of particular interest to the problem. The treatment of the slave awakened the emotional faculties of the recently arrived European and the creole. The principles proclaimed during the French Revolution and the struggle for independence of the English colonies also cast a spark of comprehension into these consciences. In Boston, the Wheatleys sponsored the literary awakening of their Sengalese slave, Phyllis; Manuel Ignacio de Silva became a professor of rhetoric under the protection of Viceroy Vasconcellos in Brazil; in Cuba, poets joined hands to buy the freedom of Juan Francisco Manzano; and, in Peru, the symptomatic case of Valdés occurs. Except for minor differences, the stories behind this series of events are identical. "Therefore, the analysis of what happened to

José Manuel Valdés fits into a pattern that is almost continental."²³

José Manuel Valdés was born in the city of Lima in the year 1763. His birth forms somewhat of an anthropological and sociological cross section. His mother was named María del Carmen Cavada. The combination of names reminds one of Yemana, the Yoruba goddess, and of the religious conciliation which the Negroes made in America. Yet, one may see, on close observation, the name of the conquistador. His father, Baltazar Valdés, was a member of the orchestra in the Teatro Principal. From his father, he received a deep intensifying musical sense--which there is in the soul of every Negro. It was his mother, a laundress, who instilled in her son the desire to rub away the dirt and unsavoriness and who gave him the pretty and sonorous name, José Manuel. He was christened by the Spaniard, Valdés, in whose household María was employed. Later, he and his wife were named José's godparents.

A very definite and worthy attachment had been produced in the centuries of contact between white and Negro in these last years of the eighteenth century. "The African spirit, with its great power of psychic infection, had

²³ Fernando Romero, "José Manuel Valdés, Great Peruvian Mulatto," Phylon, 3:298, Third Quarter, 1942.

changed a little the dubious attitude of the Christian Spaniard to a favorable extent."²⁴ This explains why "Mononguito's" godparents sent him to a nearby school. There, under the mindful eye of the teachers, he began to learn efficiently his numbers and reading. Later, he learned to recite all the prayers in the San Casiano catechism.

It was the aim of the good Valdés and his wife, Doña Mariana, who saw in José's first few intellectual ventures much intelligence, to bring out his educational possibilities. Therefore, he was placed under a priest, who, to be more exact, was Doña Marina's confessor. The priest was the principal of the high school which the order of St. Augustine maintained in Lima under the patronage of St. Ildefonse. These were happy days, for ostracism had not affected him as yet.

Adolescence brought a stronger thirst for learning. Instead of having that thirst satisfied, the youngster found that his position, unnoticed by him before, was beginning to deny him many of the finer things of life. Though it was the will of his godparents, of the priests, of several intellectuals who had taught him, it was not the will of society.

²⁴ Romero, op. cit., p. 299.

The youth of his age, many sons of slave owners, manifested a frank atavistic prejudice against any descendents like Valdés. He, who tried to improve himself was met with opposition, humiliation, and contempt. At the same time, these things were incomprehensible to him. He was a Negro and, still worse, a mulatto.

Because religion is a heritage of both the Spaniard and the Negro, "Manongo", as José was often called, was extremely close to God. He was able to attain Christian theological culture and to enter into close communication with the theologians, the mystics, the great mathematicians, the evangelists, the Latins, and the Greeks. Within these surroundings, he felt that he would be able to throw off any raiments which had clothed him heretofore. He was determined to beat his two ancestries into the rhythm of his poetry. Yet these environments deceived him, for "the church remained closed to men in the condition of Valdés until 1812."²⁵ It accepted slaves as volunteers or servants, but they were kept in an inferior status. He was a lay-brother who had seen the refusal of the Royal Order to ordain three mulatto priests. Sensibly, his desire was suppressed.

Valdés felt that he must, in some way, aid in the

²⁵ Romero, op. cit., p. 300.

betterment of Peruvian life and, possibly, the world. His thoughts then turned to alleviating pain and eliminating much of the ignorance in medicine. However, he could not become a physician; for the university courses were closed to those of his race. He disdained practicing as a "romancista" surgeon. In this capacity, he would have been able to cure external ailments only by prescribing chicken water, bread and milk, or mallow plaster. It occurred to him to prepare himself as a Latin Surgeon, since he knew so well the language of Caesar and Lucan. "In 1788, a degree as a Latin Surgeon was obtained." ²⁶ The doctor practiced conscientiously and faithfully; finally he became indispensable.

Ostracism planted in him a determination to observe an ascetic charity, which he later extolled so notably in his poetry. To fill the immense void in his soul, Valdés accelerated the rhythm of his professional life. In the next few years, he published innumerable treatises on medicine. Though they were met with the usual waves of protest, the Peruvian had triumphed.

In 1792, the town council and the cabildo, adopting an attitude which spoke highly for Lima's comprehension, asked the King to overlook the color of Valdés' skin. With

²⁶ Romero, op. cit., p. 302.

political tact, Charles VI acceded. February 4, 1807, the surgeon, José Manuel, entered the portals of the University to read his thesis, which began by thanking the monarch for having overlooked his status. "When he again crossed those portals, he was Bachelor Valdés."²⁷

Persistence, valor, intelligence, and strong character--all aided in allowing him to ascend from the alley to the most intellectual study-lecture hall. He had been placed on the same level as those who were rightfully born. Yet still in his heart was an ache. His wisdom was tinged with sadness.

Consequently, with little to encourage him, Dr. Valdés, in one last psychological crisis, decided to renounce his position and seek celestial compensation in religious life. This, he realized, was a purely personal decision--a matter of a Christian's voluntary sacrifice of secular life in exchange for the rewards of the spiritual. In this sacrifice, he found his only happiness. Dispensation was obtained from the Pope so that he might be admitted to the Holy Order whenever it was convenient. When a petition was presented to the Archbishop of the Metropolitan Cabildo, it was refused. Valdés was informed and withdrew his petition with the em-

²⁷ Romero, op. cit., p. 303.

barrassment of a peasant subdued by grief. "It was his feeling that his was a punishment from heaven for his proud ambition to become a priest."²⁸

The struggle continued. More medical treatises were published, which brought high rewards. He was elected "Protomédico" of Lima and chosen for the National Legion of Honor; he entered into professional debates, cared for a growing clientele, taught, and studied. Still later, he began to write mystic poetry, for which he has been widely acclaimed.

He translated the meditations, filled as they were with profound effusion, of the gentle Franciscan saint, Bonaventure. He wrote his admirable Salterio Peruano and his biography of Friar Martin de Porres, now a figure in the book of saints. Valdés was now free from earthly pride. The suffering of an entire life had subdued him. He began the last-named work with the statement that he had gladly accepted the task of narrating the life and miracles of the mulatto visionary, because it was God's will that he should exalt and perpetuate his memory--"since he (Valdés) was his (Brother Martin's) compatriot and of his abject class and humble birth."²⁹

²⁸ Romero, op. cit., p. 305.

²⁹ J. M. Liston, "Out of the Dark," Catholic World, 158:190, November, 1943.

After these works were completed, "Taita Valdés" was about to accomplish the last phase of his career. Though he was surrounded by affection, esteem, and admiration, his parents' sin still followed him. He was, still, unable to avoid the thrusts of ignorance and vicious envy. On July 1, 1843, El Comercio of Lima published an article, in which a foreigner, angered by certain professional contradictions made by Valdés, attacked him disrespectfully and perfidiously. He, like Plácido, was viciously accused, though he had been an ardent defender of good.

On the twenty-ninth day of the same month and year, José Manuel became gravely ill and, on this day, left this world forever, "still prepondering those ideologies which he felt to be the wishes of the Heavenly Father."³⁰

B. Works of Valdés

There are between thirty and thirty-five medical works and twelve major literary contributions. José Antonio de Lavalle and Aermilio Valdezán have published both biographical data and some of Valdés' poems. There was no one good source; therefore, the writer must admit that the information on Valdés was collected under many unsatisfactory

³⁰Ibid., p. 192.

conditions, among them the necessity of using several secondary sources.

The title of Valdés' first poetic work is significant: Poesías Espirituales Escritas A Beneficio Y Para El Uso De Las Personas Sensibles Y Piadosas.

This first attempt, published in Lima, 1819, is rather felicitous. The verse is beautiful, sincere, and full of meaning. Generally, in all the poems which make up the work, the verse appears smooth flowing and well handled.

Witness the following passage, taken from the Coloquio Entre Jesús Y El Alma, where the former says tenderly and fervently:

Búscame en los cielos
 Que mi gloria cantan:
 Búscame en los astros,
 Cuyo giro pasma:
 Búscame en las aves,
 Que los aires rasgan:
 Búscame en las flores
 Y frutos que agradan:
 Búscame en los mares
 De espumosas aguas,
 Que frágil arena
 Detiene en las playas.

Búscame en los brutos
 Y búscame en tantas
 Obras maravillas
 Que al hombre arrebatan;
 Pues el universo
 Que hice de la nada,

Con sonoras voces
Mi poder ensalza.³¹

Christ is saying to man that he can be found not only at the foot of the altar but also in the wondrous works of nature and in the marvelous universe which He has created from nothing. Christ, too, in the poem, offers comfort and solace to man, who cannot seem to find himself.

Valdés' thirst for knowledge could be satisfied only at the founts of theology. So, too, his yearning for God is best expressed in mystic poetry. He often reminds one of St. John of the Cross.

In the poem, El Alma Perfecta, the author appears to express those sentiments which he carries continuously through life:

Así el cargo ejercita
De amiga: se hermosea contemplando
La bondad infinita;
Y cuando por perdón está clamando
Del mal que en sí conoce, y del que ignora,
Es cual paloma que cantando Lloro.³²

He had never known sincere friendship. Yet he believed in goodness. The evil which he could not comprehend left him meek; yet, his soul never turned from God.

³¹ José Manuel Valdés, "Coloquio Entre Jesús Y El Alma," cited by Fernando Romero, Phylon (Atlanta), Third Quarter, 1942, p. 308.

³² José Manuel Valdés, "El Alma Perfecta," cited by Fernando Romero, Phylon (Atlanta), Third Quarter, 1942, p. 308.

With unaccustomed spontaneity and placidness in the same poem, he places on the lips of El Alma Perfecta these words:

Oh, llama siempre ardiente!
 Oh, luz eterna que jamas se apaga!
 Oh, si en ti de continuo encendiera
 Oh, si tu resplandor me esclareciera por
 tu rostro suspiro.

Divino amor! Oh, pena dulce y suave
 Mientras que te miro
 Ojalá que ella con mi vida acabo!
 Pues ni en el Cielo ni en tierra criatura
 Existe comparable a tu hermosura.³³

Here, again, we are reminded of the mystics. He, like them, possesses religious ecstasy, genuineness, and a warm inner soul of action. These religious stanzas appear to have in them the essence of intimate Spain. The ardor of his feeling is equalled by the extraordinary richness of his imagery, symbolism, and complete meditation. Compare these last stanzas with the Llama de Amor Viva of St. John of the Cross. Says St. John of the Cross:

Oh llama de amor viva!
 Que tiernamente hieres
 De mi alma en el mas profundo centro
 Pues ya no eres esquiva,
 Acaba ya, si quieres,
 Rompe la tela deste dulce encuentro.

Oh cauterio suave!
 Oh regalada llaga!
 Oh mano blanda oh toque delicado,

³³ José Manuel Valdés "El Alma Perfecto", op. cit. p. 308.

Que a vida eterna suave,
Y toda deuda paga,
Matando, muerte en vida la has trocado.

Cuan manso y amoroso
Recuerdas en mi seno,
Donde secretamente solo moras,
Y en tu aspirar sabroso,
De bien y gloria lleno,
Cuan delicadamente me enamoras.³⁴

This poem, like the one of Valdés, is a burst of rapture from a soul which has attained the bliss of transformation. Both are filled with hidden beauties and are exquisitely musical. A perfect soul is illuminated with soft radiance and beauteous imagery. It has been made one by divine fire and, thus, by God's touch, has become a living flame.

From the Romance ^{Heroico} (Heroico), Valdés says tenderly and spiritually:

Oh, tú mortal a quien la ley del cuerpo
Seduca con halagos y contrista!
Aliento cobra: ven, y atento advierte
La Gloria que a los castos se destina.

Feliz, pues, quien intacto a Dios se ofrece
Por todo el curso de su santa vida.
Siendo el mismo la victima, el ministro,
Y el ara donde fiel se sacrifica.

Y confiado en su amor y en su clemencia,
Vivir espero el resto de mis días,
Amando esta virtud que al hombre eleva
A tanta gloria, a tan suprema dicha.³⁵ -

³⁴ St. John of the Cross, "Llama de Amor Viva," cited by E. Allison Peers, Studies of the Spanish Mystics, (London: Sheldon Press, 1927), p. 278.

³⁵ José Manuel Valdés, "Romance Heroico," cited by Fernando Romero, Phylon (Atlanta), Third Quarter, 1942, p. 314.

The author knows only the humiliating sorrow of being a wretched social product, the physical suffering in a hospital, the frightening sadness of the dimly lighted church and cloister, and the secret desire for a woman's affection. Emotionally unsatisfied, he extols purity, chastity, service to the Almighty, and intercommunion of the soul with God. Valdés is happy to offer himself wholly to the Father for the remainder of his life. He is in search only of the altar of the faithful and is assured that glory is the true destination of the chaste.

At this same historical moment, during the life of José Manuel Valdés, there arose a struggle between the creole and the European. South America aspired to be free. San Martín and Bolívar arrived on the scene, inflamed by democratic and just ideals. San Martín accomplished much for the abolitionist cause. He proclaimed freedom of all children at birth, invited Negroes into the ranks of the patriot army, and proclaimed these volunteers free men as a reward for service rendered in the defense of the capital. Finally, he issued decrees which protected the lives of the sons of slaves, who, by virtue of the aforementioned edict, were, now, born free in Peru.

All of this valiant and noble campaign echoed deeply in Valdés' spirit. He had faith once more in life. With

this as impetus, he began his odes to San Martín and Bolívar and the first constitution, which were published within the year.

Gallego had given perfect expression to the patriotic rage and enthusiasm of a whole nation. Quintana, his contemporary, had shown, in his very first poems, his love for independence and liberty. Valdés, too, used the pen to flay any injustices in his country and plead for internal reform. Yet, since there were innumerable verses pamphlets, speeches, and other modes of communications, denouncing the dissatisfactions among the lower classes, Valdés' odes carried with them no special accent which might make them stand out among the hundreds of similar productions then circulating. At the very end of one of his odes, he registers his enthusiasms in becoming a citizen. Addressing Lima, he concludes in these words:

Y pues él te levanta un monumento
 La gratitud le dé su complemento:
 Tus hijos en suspechos
 Esta inscripción tendrán por distintivo:
 De San Martín la libertad recibo
 Y mis justos derechos.³⁶

Continuous struggle had weakened Valdés' soul. The trumpet, now, did not resound heroically in his mouth. Soon, therefore, he left it to return to his mysticism by a

³⁶ José Manuel Valdés, "Ode a San Martín," cited by Fernando Romero, *Phylon* (Atlanta), Third Quarter, 1942, p. 309.

transitional poem, La Fe en Cristo Triunfante en Lima, published in Lima, 1828. This poem partook of his new and ephemeral interest in political life and of his profoundly religious tendency. It is a work purporting to combat the idea of the Congress of 1828 of decreeing religious freedom.

After this, he returned to God. Here, at last, he found his true path. And, here, also, there was a Negro-Spanish flavor in his work, hardly manifested in his other artistic contributions.

In the Salterio Peruano O Paráfrasis de los Ciento Cincuenta Salmos de David y Algunos Canticos Sagrados en Verso Castellano, the African essence appears, both in the intention behind the work and in the work itself. This was Valdés' most eminent work. It was published in Lima in the year 1833 by J. Masías. The second edition was published in Paris by Rosa & Bouret in 1836.

Valdés attains in the Salterio the height of poetic form. This he must have acquired from his university training. True poetry to him was one of the most interesting branches of literature--the major effort of genius.

Because of his great culture and profundity, the Peruvian was able to inject great emotion into his lyrics. Yet, there was a mixture of beauty with poor colonial taste, elegance with the familiar, and hackneyed rhythm with flawless rhythm.

On the other hand, according to Menéndez y Pelayo, the Psalms contain exuberant imagination, solemn obscurity, submissive majesty and that unusual ascension that elevates the soul between heaven and earth and makes it perceive something like an echo of the sacred secrets.³⁷ How majestic is this Psalm, which begs God to continue his mighty works:

Omnipotente Dios Consuma tu obra
 Salvador nuestro, tu piedad nos valga
 Conviértanos tu amor, y haz que a ti vuelvan
 Los que distantes de tu gremio se hallan.

El Señor tan benigno con nosotros
 Así como al presente nos rescata
 Con su divino soplo hará que brote
 Su fruto nuestra tierra, estando intacta.³⁸

The soul is elevated because of God's goodness and mercy:

Le has perdonado todos las maldades
 Que dieron ocasión a su desgracia
 Abismando sus culpas en el seno
 De tu misericordia soberana.³⁹

How solemn are these words which extol the glories with which God has surrounded us:

Al Señor, alma mía magnífica
 Cuanta, oh Dios y Señor, es tu grandeza
 Sin cesar la pública,

37 Menendez y Pelayo, Antología de Poetas Hispanoamericanos translated by Fernando Romero, op. cit. p. 303.

38 José Manuel Valdés, "Benedixiste Domine," cited by Menendez y Pelayo, Antología de Poetas Hispano-Americanos (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1894), p. 392.

39 Loc. cit.

Alaba y glorifica
Con sonora naturaleza.

Qué grandes son tus obras resplandece!
Tu saber, oh Señor, en cuanto hiciste
Y porque en ti creyese
El hombre y te sirviese
Con qué dones la tierra enriqueciste.⁴⁰

All serve the Father:

Y así como te sirven obsecuentes
El aire y fuego estan a su servicio
Espiritus ardientes
Que cumplen diligente
De angeles y ministros el oficio.⁴¹

These words even plead for the purification of sinners:

Luzca, Señor, el venturoso día
En qué a los pecadores justifiques
Y aun a la gente impía
Y alábale, alma mía
Para que más y más te purifiques.⁴²

Without the slightest doubt, they lend themselves to obscure expression and to the solemnity of the mulatto, when he writes as one from another race. From the stylistic point of view, even, they offer much that can be attractive to one in Valdés' position.

In addition, these verses extol the collective salvation of the Hebrew people through the aid of the Lord. A Messianic racialism runs through them. Note the following

⁴⁰ Valdés, "Benedic Anima Mea," cited by Menendez y Pelayo, op. cit., p. 393.

⁴¹ Loc. cit.

⁴² Valdés, loc. cit.

stanza, where those formerly in captivity are asking the blessings of Christ:

En fin, Señor, tu bendición echaste
Sobre esta tierra que tu herencia llamas
Y al pueblo de Jacob has libertado!
Del duro cautiverio en que se hallaba.⁴³

For a man who has been caused to suffer, through no fault of his own, the Psalms must have contained something quite special. This is why Valdés, who interprets them in a mulatto spirit, has the power to penetrate their intimate essence more readily than other translators--more readily than Don Pablo Olavide, another Peruvian of the colonial period who attempted to translate the Psalms. The adaptations of these two poets have, frequently, been compared with undeniable skill. From such comparison, one finds that there is more intense emotion in Valdés. He penetrates suffering more deeply than the former. Therefore, he can express a more profound sorrow than can the other with his ascetic dryness. Even the harsh sounding Castilian acquires suaveness on being distilled in this sorrow, which is as deep and black as his color. Compare, for example, Olavide's version of the Evangelio En Triunfo with Valdés' one of Isaiah's Confitebor Tibi Domine and of Hannah's Exultavit Cor Meun In

⁴³ José Manuel Valdés, "Benedixiste Domine," cited by Menendez y Pelayo, Antología de Poetas Hispano-Americanos (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1894), p. 391.

Domino. Olavide gives the following:

Te alabaré, Señor, toda mi vida,
 Porque conmigo estabas enojado,
 y en vez de castigarme como puedes,
 trocaste tus furoros en halagos.
 Tú eres, mi Dios, mi salvador querido,
 el dios que de tus iras me ha salvado,
 viendo tanta bondad, yo no te temo
 con la llaneza del amor te trato.⁴⁴

Valdes, on the contrary, exclaims

Te albaré, Señor, pues cuando estabas
 Contra mi justamente enfurecido,
 mi corazon bañste de consuelo,
 Suspiendo piadoso tu castigo.
 El poderoso Dios viene a salvarme;
 y viene como padre el mas benigno.
 Y para que no le tema como esclavo,
 Sino que le ame con respeto de hijo.⁴⁵

Here, the author introduces the concept of slavery, which he can appreciate with all its horror. The ideology is more pointed and precise, and the final comparison appears all the more tender. In the canticle of Hannah, Olavide says

El Señor es quien mata y da la vida,
 el que al mortal lo absuelve y lo condena,
 el que los bienes da, y el que los quita,
 en fin, es el que abate y el que eleva.
 Sacude el polvo al indigente y le hace
 Salir del muladar de su miseria,
 para ponerlo entre los Reyes altos,
 y darle un trono en que feliz se sienta.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ D. Pablo Olavide, "Evangelio En Triunfo," cited by Fernando Romero, Phylon (Atlanta), Third Quarter, 1942, p. 311.

⁴⁵ José Manuel Valdes, "Confitebor Tibi Domine," cited by Fernando Romero, Phylon (Atlanta), Third Quarter, 1942, p. 311.

⁴⁶ D. Pablo Olavide, "Exultavit Cor Meun In Domino." cited by Fernando Romero, op. cit., p. 311.

And Valdés:

El Señor vivifica y da la muerte;
 En los sepulcros hunde, y de ellos saca:
 De las riquezas y también las quita:
 Y humilla al uno cuando al otro exalta.
 Al pobre y miserable que yacía
 Sobre el estiércol, su poder le vanta;
 Y en el excelso trono le coloca,
 Donde los reyes a los pueblos mandan.⁴⁷

What emotion and poetic brilliance are found in these verses, in which, more than the poet, the man Valdés is speaking, elevated by his spiritual strength to a university professorship from a room in the alley of Santa Clara Street.

There is, moreover, in the Psalms, a characteristic note which particularizes them and responds, also, to an inherent quality of the Negro spirit: polyrhythm. It likewise adds to the Spanish spirit.

Olavide has made the verses of his work of equal length and his stanzas of an identical number of lines, "because thus it will be easier to sing them all on a single musical pattern."⁴⁸ This uniform monotony contributes to the mediocrity of the work. On the other hand, Valdés has varied the technic of his work, "not only to avoid tedious monotony, but also to fit the story of each one."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Valdés, op. cit., p. 312.

⁴⁸ Fernando Romero, Phylon (Atlanta), Third Quarter, 1942, p. 312.

⁴⁹ Loc. cit.

In one of the editions of the work, to be found in the National Library, appears the final religious compositions of the first Negro poet in Peru. J. M. Liston, in his comprehensive discussion of the poet's life, states, "In the margin one reads the following words written in the unmistakable hand of Don Ricardo Palma, 'These were the last verses that Valdés wrote, and we have copied them from the manuscript.'"⁵⁰

A Doña Manuela Valenzuela
después de comulgar

De Cristo la carne es mía,
Su sangre mis culpas lava.
Y en Dios mismo me transformo
Siendo mis miserias tantas.
El amor a tanto exceso
Oh, mi Jesús, te arrebatá.
Pues lo que tienes me das.
Tu Deidad, tu cuerpo y alma.
Y que te daré, Dios mío,
Viendo lo mucho que me amas?
Te daré mi corazón
Aunque cubierto de manchas.
Recíbelo, dueño amado;
Purifíquelo tu gracia;
Para que solo me rija
Tu voluntad soberana.⁵¹

This poem written in Lima in 1843, is a beautiful testimony to the author's character. Sincere catholicism and de-

⁵⁰ J. M. Liston, "Out of the Dark," Catholic World, 158:193, November, 1943.

⁵¹ José Manuel Valdés, "A Doña Manuela Valenzuela," cited by J. M. Liston, "Out of the Dark," Catholic World, 158:193, November, 1943.

votion have been blended into the poem as he continues, as in all the Psalms, to praise God for his bountiful mercies. As Valdés partook of the blood of Christ at Communion, he could not help but feel that this was the flesh of the Father who would efface all sins, if one would but heed His Word. Love for God is extolled, again, in the above offering, just as it has been in the Psalms and in the spiritual poems. Valdes ponders. The Lord loves His children. He gives to humanity His Divinity, His Body, and His Soul. What, thought Valdes, can one give a God so good in exchange for so many mercies? The poet gives him his heart, though covered with imperfections, and implores the Father to receive and to purify it by His Grace. It is his desire to be governed only by God's sovereign will. The Salterio is, beyond all doubt, the best of the works which came from the Peruvian's pen. The Psalms are so spiritual that one cannot help meditating upon them. They possess greater human and literary value than any other work of its kind. Moreover, the greatest of Spanish critics, Menendez y Pelayo, has acclaimed it the best in Spanish.

José Manuel was burdened with the weight of old age when asked by the priest of Santo Domingo to write the life of Blessed Father Martin de Porres. Nevertheless, the author took up this duty devotedly. It was his wish to

glorify the Father in his servant, Martin de Porres. Likewise, he felt that he owed a debt of gratitude to his fellow country-man who had been a model of inspiration to his arduous ascension. Valdés had lived the life of a Peruvian mulatto, which, undoubtedly, qualified him to account for the human experiences of Brother Martin. Over and above his knowledge of the spiritual life, gained by his translation of the Poemas Espirituales and the Salterio, Valdés made a study of the spiritual life in general, in order to fulfill, more conscientiously, the duties of a biographer.

The life of Blessed Martin de Porres, which was entitled Vida Admirable Del Bienaventurado Fray Martin de Porres, was published in 1840. "A second edition appeared in Lima in the year 1863. A fourth and latest one, sponsored by Father Manuel I. Hernández, O. P., was published in 1938."⁵²

The work is a moving prose account of the life of the Dominican Father and is filled, according to Menendez y Pelayo, with emotion, sentiment, Christian humility, and religious fervor.

This discussion of Peru's greatest colored poet can be concluded by stating one or two concrete ideas concerning his literary and cultural worth. Menendez y Pelayo has

⁵² J. M. Liston, "Out of the Dark," Catholic World, 158:193, November, 1943.

avored and eulogized him as the academic poet. His words are as follows:

Dejando aparte estos rezagados del siglo XVIII, la literatura peruana del siglo XIX empieza propiamente con el médico Don José Manuel Valdés y el diplomático Don José María de Pando. El Dr. Valdés, protomédico del Perú y director del colegio de Medicina y Cirugía de Lima ocupó honesta y piadosamente sus ocios en una traducción de los Salmos, muy notable por la pureza de lengua y por la sencilla y dulzura del estilo, que sabe F. Luis de León en muchos trozos.⁵³

Valdés is penetratingly deep. His attitude toward life is subjective, conscientious, philosophical, and sad. Lack of affection has ostracized him sentimentally, and there is little of the warmth and tenderness which will be found in the other two authors to be considered. The patriotic is the only path which he treads with Plácido and Guillén.

Valdés' poetry did not consist, merely, of a harmonious blending of clever versifications and exhaustingly deep words. It was an emotional outlet, which gave him opportunity to speak from his heart and to explain honestly what he felt. Deep emotion and fervent love for the omnipotent Father, an inherent quality from both races, was another notable testimony to his character. The man was well acquainted with what he wrote. His knowledge of sacred scrip-

⁵³ Menendez y Pelayo, Antología de Poetas Hispano-Americanos (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1894), p. CCIXI.

ture was well attested in the Salterio and in the Poesías Espirituales.

A solemn vow of chastity was made by Valdes before the miraculous statue of Our Lady in the basilica attached to the Convent of St. Dominic of Lima. Love for Her was truly evident in the dedication of the Psalms.

Before "Immaculate Conception" had been clearly defined, our author had already written these words:

'To Mary, most holy Mother of God, preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception. Virgin before and after the birth of Her Divine Child. Ever a Virgin.'

This is the paragraph dedicated by your humble servant, José Manuel Valdés.⁵⁴

Valdés was a writer of deep meaningful threnody, who rose from the soul of a descendent of slaves and who possessed an unusual warmth of human quality and feeling.

⁵⁴ These are the words of José Manuel Valdés, cited by J. M. Liston, "Out of the Dark," Catholic World, 158:194, November, 1943.

CHAPTER III
GABRIEL DE LA CONCEPCIÓN VALDÉS,
THE CUBAN MARTYR

A. LIFE

Cuba has produced many poets. Some of them have been among the greatest in America. Yet, few have entered so deeply into the warp of national imagination as has the ill-fated Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, who used the pseudonym, Plácido.

Several critics have thought that much of his repute could be traced to his limitations, his misfortunes, and his tragic end. Regarding this point, the celebrated critic, Don Marcelino Menendez y Pelayo, commenting on the poet in his Antología de Poetas Hispanoamericanos, said the following:

Blanco o Negro, Plácido aunque muy distante de Heredia de Milanés, de la Avellaneda, de Luaces y de Zenea para no citar a otros, tiene su valor propio y su representación en el Parnaso Cubano. Quien escribió el magistral y primoroso romance de Xicotencal que Gongora no desdenaría entre los suyos el bello soneto descriptivo La Muerte de Gesler, la graciosa letrilla La Flor de la Caña y la inspirada Plegaria que iba recitando camino del patíbulo no necesita ser mulato ni haber sido fusilado para que la posteridad se acuerde de él.⁵⁵

55 Menéndez y Pelayo, Antología de Poetas Hispanoamericanos (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1927), III. p. CXXX.

Seemingly, no one has placed himself in a proper position to interpret and judge the life of the poet. Some writers have regarded him as a fantastic being who came into the world predestined to be an expiatory victim of ancestral faults. Other writers have regarded him as a man endowed "with some talent and with a morbid sensibility who made use of them for practical ends, thus misusing the gifts that were best designed to win for him esteem."⁵⁶

In the eyes of his own people and of foreigners, Plácido was an illegitimate. He was born to a barber and a dancer who abandoned him at birth in the receptacle of a foundling home. The forsaken child was, later, taken by his blind and impoverished grandmother, who had once been a slave. In order to educate him, she delivered him over to a semi-mendicant life.

The following entry of his baptism appears in the eighth book of the Foundlings of the Casa Cuña of Havana: "Thursday April 6, 1809 was left at this Casa Cuña a child."⁵⁷ When he was taken from the basket which held his tiny body, a paper was found on his person that read, "Born on March 18, 1809."

⁵⁶ Emilia Bernal, "Gabriél de la Concepción Valdés, His Life and His Work," Inter America, 8:153, May, 1924.

⁵⁷ Bernal, op. cit., p. 153.

His father, Diego Ferrer Matoso, a native of Havana, was born free. Since he was a hair dresser of the aristocrats, he enjoyed a somewhat pleasant social life. It was this contact which gave him acquaintance with a dancer named Concepción Vazquez. Their affair was not especially distasteful to Havana; for Spaniards, Cubans, and Negroes frequently mingled in relations like this one.

Plácido studied in two schools of primary instruction under the old teacher, Pedro del Sol, and, afterwards, in the school for colored people directed by Don Francisco Bandiaran. Escobar, the famous portrait painter in Havana, developed the youngster's talent for painting. At the age of fourteen, he was sent to learn the printer's trade in the Imprenta de Marina, under the direction of Don Severino Bolona. Plácido's family, remorsefully, had to take him from school for financial reasons. Yet, the printer's school, which had been a center of culture, had incredibly developed the precocious faculties and potentialities of the boy. The youngster was already beginning to show great promise with his verses. At the age of sixteen, he began to work as a maker of tortoise shell combs and ornaments. This occupation yielded large returns, as the trinkets were made, primarily, for people of great wealth.

So much for the first years of the life of Gabriel de

la Concepción Valdés, who, in the future, was to be called exclusively "Plácido," "a name derived from the hero in the novel, Plácido y Blanca, written by his friend, Madame de Genlis."⁵⁸ Later, he adopted it as a pseudonym when he began to publish his poems.

In the years which followed his childhood, Plácido's life began to follow its true direction. His talents had already begun to flower and to win for him the attention of the people. Sometimes he was congratulated; other times, he was mocked. His temperament, the product of the mingling of two ancient bloods, Spanish and African, began to manifest those tones of melancholy eroticism that so strongly characterized him. There was the clash, too, between environment and inheritance.

At this period, he fell in love with the young colored girl, who was immortalized in his poems under the name of "Fela". She was the daughter of a slave, though she had, herself, been born free. She had been adopted by her mother's mistress and educated carefully. Among the fine talents which the young woman possessed was the ability to play the harp, to paint, and to do fine needlework. Although Plácido's father opposed this love affair, it found a protec-

⁵⁸ Alfred Coester, Literary History of Spanish America (New York: Macmillan Company, 1916), p. 385.

tor in the adoptive mother (the mistress), who would have aided them in marriage if fate had not intercepted. The cholera, which scourged Havana in 1833, made "Fela" one of its victims.

The boyish capacity that had won him fame as a gifted improviser was, now, at its height. Each day, his abilities were acquiring strength. General praise flattered him. Yet, his true talents, which were menaced by these easy improvisations, were suffering. Nevertheless, Plácido owed the only happiness of his life to this ability to improvise; for, because of it, he was sought after at weddings, baptisms, dances, suppers, and all kinds of festivities given by both white and colored hostesses.

Plácido was introduced into the circle of Valdés Mechuca by a Velez y Herrera. Although a ragged popular poet, he was something more within the adverse surroundings in which he was developing.

In 1834, several Havana men of letters sent a collection of laudatory poems, which they entitled Aureola Poética Al Señor D. Francisco Martínez de la Rosa, to the man who had been, recently, appointed prime minister in Madrid. "La Siempreviva," Placido's contribution, was considered the best poem in the garland.⁵⁹ The minister wrote a personal letter

⁵⁹ Coester, op. cit.,

of thanks to his admirer.

1836 found his old master, Bolona, the printer, proposing to publish a volume of his verses. Differences arose between them, however, and prevented the carrying out of the plan.

Still later, the owner of the press which published a daily paper, La Aurora, obtained from him the right to print his verses. For the first time, the author thought that he was about to alter the difficult situation of his life; but this undertaking failed. As a compromise, he obtained a position on the staff of La Aurora with a monthly salary of twenty-five pesos. A poem each day was to be published.

Amid these circumstances, he was married to María de la Morales, the daughter of a tailor and midwife, in 1842. His responsibilities were increasing. A meager salary was partially covering them. To earn more money, he made a trip to Trinidad. Misfortune, as usual, overshadowed his better intentions; for the government was advised that he was a suspect, and his imprisonment lasted several months.

After his liberation, the poet reappeared in Matanzas going about his ordinary duties, despite the fact that he was followed and watched by the vigilance of the Spanish government, which was not slow in realizing Plácido's popularity with his people. January 30, 1844 found him impris-

oned, once again, in the fortress La Vigia. Here, the convicted man prayed fervently for liberation because of his innocence. The desire was not realized, for he was removed to the prison and charged with treason and leadership in a conspiracy.

Plácido was tried and condemned to die; from this unhappy end, he was not saved by genius. "Neither his laudatory attitude, which he had always maintained towards the mother country, nor his peaceful nature were credited."⁶⁰ It has been affirmed that the attorney who represented him suggested that he appeal to the clemency of the captain-general by the denouncement of others. "This he refused to do, preferring to retain the honesty and virtue which had always accompanied his character."⁶¹

On June 26, 1844, Plácido was taken to the chapel with ten persons of his race who were to be executed. The poet was extremely busy during the remainder of the day. He had written a farewell letter to his wife and, to her, he had also commended a testamentary memoir.

On the morning of the twenty-eighth, the accused who were to die went from the hospital of Santa Isabel to the place of execution, which, sadistically, had been in view

⁶⁰ Bernal, op. cit., p. 157.

⁶¹ Loc. cit.

from their window. Each of the martyrs held in his hands a crucifix which he embraced as he walked along. Plácido was the most serene. "Tradition says that he recited stanzas from his poems in a tone of superhuman resignation."⁶² Finally, the executioners fired the fatal shots. All fell convulsed in intense suffering, with the exception of Plácido, who, raising his chained hands fervently to the heavens, exclaimed in a voice which broke the silence of the infinite: "Farewell life. Fire here. There is no pity in this world for me."⁶³ He had only been slightly wounded at the first discharge. Four grenadiers came forward, placed their guns at arms' length, and fired again. Only then was Plácido released from earthly life to take his anguished soul to the Supreme Being.

B. WORKS

There can be no doubt that Plácido's poetry is as interesting as his life. Unlike many of the Cuban writers who flourished with him and those who immediately followed him, Plácido employed and cultivated the lyric style.

His work was abundant. It is sufficient, merely, to recall the six years from 1836 until 1842, during which time

⁶² Bernal, op. cit., p. 157.

⁶³ Loc. cit.

he wrote a poem every day as an employee on the staff of the newspaper, La Aurora. However, this abundance is in inverse relation to the worth of the verses. In 1839, he brought out his first volume of poems, published in Matanzas on the Imprenta Del Gobierno Y Marina. The poems which are to be found in the volume are not surpassed by those written in his best days of writing.

There were some twenty-eight editions of the poems of Plácido. However, only the last three editions were in complete form. The text which was most useful for this study was Poesías Completas de Plácido, published in Paris by the Librería Española de Mme. C. Denné Schmitz e Hijo in the year 1862. Poesías Selectas de Plácido, which comes from a Colección de Libros Cubanos, whose director was Fernando Ortiz, a prominent Cuban himself, was often consulted. There is a noteworthy introduction by A. M. Eligio de la Puente and liberal informative comment by the publishing house, Cultural, S. A. La Moderna Poesía Librería Cervantes, Habana, 1930. It is in this edition that the poems of Plácido are grouped in five sections. They are as follows:

1. Satiric poems in which there are also included some humorous compositions.
2. Didactic poems which give the fables and the epistolary to Lince.

3. Eclogues in which there is the Egloga Cubana.

4. Narrative poetry grouping the romances of this class, the chivalric legend, El Hijo de Maldición, and the fragment of his heroic canto to Villaclara.

5. Sonnets.

The poet's earlier poems and, perhaps, the majority of those in the volume of his collected verses are occasional in character: birthday congratulations, condolences, and the like. According to some, he was all too ready to purchase crumbs for favors, often reciting at evening parties such verses as he would write for the occasion.

Milanes probably referred to Plácido as "El Poeta Envilecido," in the lines reproaching an unnamed poet for degrading his art by singing at the magnate's feast, "without shame or senses and disputing a bone with the mastiff".⁶⁴ But there is rich grain among the chaff of Plácido's work.

In the satires and the epigram, he captured something of the mood of Larra. Plácido criticizes pungently, caustically, with a mind penetrating and judicious. The verses are short, pointed, and amusing. Wittiness is a chief trait, and ridicule, as well as conciliatory spirit, is evident. He characterizes well a usurer in these words:

⁶⁴ Northup, op. cit., p. 386.

Quando encontréis a un hombre distraído
 Que no le place el ambar de las flores,
 Sin parientes ni amigos, sin amores,
 Pobre de gusto, y falto de sentido;

Siempre en demandas, siempre compungido.
 Protestando a los jueces y asesores,
 Que dió su plata por hacer favores,
 Sin interés a cuanto vió aflijido:

Y si le oís hablar bajo y confuso,
 De Letras, premios, pérdida y dinero,
 Medrando a espensas de fatal abuso;

Temedle como al mismo Cancerbero,
 Porque si no es procurador intruso.
 Será su equivalente...un usurero.⁶⁵

An experience with a deceptive mercenary female is described thus:

A querer con delirio una enemiga
 Me condujo fatídica mi estrella,
 Y el es quivo desden que encontré en ella
 Acrisolaba mi mortal fatiga.

"Inhumana" la dije: "no te obliga
 La llama de mi amor? Pues si eres bella,
 Indícame por Dios cuál es aquella
 Senda que quieres que en amarte siga.

Así la dije; y ella desdenosa
 Volviendo el rostro en ademán severo
 (Esquivez natural de toda hermosa),

Me dijo: no te canses, majadero:
 Quieres verme contigo carinosa?
 Regálame un quitrín, dame dinero.⁶⁶

One can see a cunning Negro smile illuminating these satirical works.

⁶⁵ Poesías Completas de Plácido (Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés), "El Usurero" (Paris: Mme, C. Denne Schmitz E Hijo, 1862), p. 226.

⁶⁶ Plácido, "Decepcion," op. cit., p. 72.

In the epigram, Plácido was brusque; in fact, he was almost brutal. This seems to have been the safety valve of his proverbial bitterness, but he always placed his finger on the sore. Here are several more verses which are unusual and attractive in subject matter.

One amusing poem has been translated into English by Emilia Bernal for Inter-America magazine:

That decrepit hateful skin flint
Day and night is thinking only
Of accumulating money.
Hence his heir, alert and greedy
Is splitting his sides with laughter.⁶⁷

And another:

That idiot that goes yonder
Is a devil of a talker
And his name is Johnny Mumm
How many of his kind I know.⁶⁸

All of the epigrams do not hold the sting or pointed allusion in the last line; yet, here is a keenly satirical one on a doctor, which is terse and represented plainly in a few words with the antithesis in the final line:

Un doctor no pudo hacer
Sanar la cojera a Juana,
Y ella de misa al volver,
Halló un toro, echó a correr,
Y subióse a una ventana.

Bajo pasado el terror,
Libre del físico mal

⁶⁷ Bernal, op. cit., p. 73.

⁶⁸ Loc. cit.

Y del insano dolor;
De suerte que el animal
Fue mas hábil que el doctor.⁶⁹

From this, we gather the poet does not think a great deal of the men of medicine of his time.

In his advice against tattlers of the times, he writes pungently in the form of a questioner, concerning the fate of one:

Tú ves aquel figurón
Hecho de cristal de roca
Con una sierpe en la boca
Y un fuelle en el corazón?
"No comprendo la invencion."
"Como? No las comprendido?
Míralo bien.
"Ya he caído:
Es la efigie de un soplón.⁷⁰

A word must be said of a booklet of "Letrillas". The booklet, which incorporated his already discussed epigrams and these letrillas, was called, according to Emily Bernal, El Vegura.

The little poems are beautiful lyrical pieces and are as delightful and fragrant as wild Cuban flora. There are little descriptive pictures of native life and love-making, in which the words of the title serve as a refrain. Among them are La Flor de la Caña, La Flor de la Piña, and La Flor de Café. A delightful refrain completes each stanza, and the

69 Plácido, "Epigramas VII," op. cit., p. 294.

70 Plácido, "Un Soplón," op. cit., p. 295.

poems are filled with pleasantness.

For example:

La Flor de Cafe

Prendado estoy de una hermosa
 Por quien la vida dare
 Si me acoge cariñosa,
 Porque es candida y hermosa
 "Como la flor del café."

Son sus ojos refulgentes,
 Grana en sus labios se ve,
 Y con sus menudos dientes,
 Blancos, parejos, lucentes,
 "Como la flor del café."

Una sola vez la hable
 Y la dije: "Me amas, Flora?
 Y mas cantares te hare,
 Que perlas llueve la aurora
 "Sobre la flor del café?"

Ser fino y constante juro,
 De cumplirlo estoy seguro,
 Hasta morir te amare;
 Porque mi pecho es tan puro
 "Como la flor del café."⁷¹

One can see the candid beauty, feel a sensuousness, and smell the fragrant coffee blossom in the little poem. The author describes the blossoming pineapple plant in the letrilla, La Flor de la Piña:

La fruta más bella
 Que nace en las Indias,
 La mas estimada
 De cuantos la miran,
 Es la piña dulce
 Que el néctar nos brinda

⁷¹ Plácido, "La Flor de Café," op. cit., p. 236.

Más grato y sabroso
 Que aquel que en la antigua
 Edad saborearon
 Deidades olímpicas:
 Pero es más preciosa
 "La flor de la piña."

Cuando sobre el tallo
 Presentase erguida,
 De verde corona
 La testa ceñida,
 Proclámala reina
 La feraz campiña,
 Salúdala el alba
 De perlas con risa,
 Favonio la besa,
 Y el astro del día
 Contempla estasiado
 "La flor de la piña."⁷²

The picturesque sugar plant reminds one of certain passages of Guillén's Caña; however, Plácido's lines are far more beautiful:

Yo vi una veguera
 Triguena tostada,
 Que el sol envidioso
 De sus lindas gracias,
 O quizás bajando
 De su esfera sacra
 Prendado de ella,
 Le quemo la cara.
 Y es tierna y modesta,
 Como cuando saca
 Sus primeros tilos
 "La flor de la caña."⁷³

To a talented man in the social position of Plácido, whose very name, according to the custom of the founding

⁷² Plácido, "La Flor de la Piña," op. cit., p. 257.

⁷³ Plácido, "La Flor de la Caña," op. cit., p. 36.

asylum which had sheltered his infancy, commemorated the charity of the good bishop who established the institution, life must, at times, have seemed very bitter. Expression of such feelings can be read in many of his poems.

The beautiful lines on La Malva Y La Palma have the power to move the reader deeply. The poem is replete with elegance and feeling:

Una malva rastrera que medraba
 En la cumbre de un monte gigantesco,
 Despreciando a una palma que en el llano
 Leda ostentaba sus racimos bellos,
 De este modo decía: "Que te sirve
 Ser gala de los campos y ornamento,
 Que sean tus ramos de esmeralda plumas
 Y arrebatarse con majestuoso aspecto?
 "De qué sirve que al verte retratada
 En el limpio cristal de un arroyuelo,
 Parezca que una estrella te decora
 Y que sacuda tu corona el viento,
 Cuando yo, de quién nadie mención hace,
 Bajo mis plantas tu cabeza tengo...?"
 La palma entonces remeció sus hojas,
 Como aquel que contesta sonriendo,
 Y la dijo--"Que un rayo me aniquile
 Si no es verdad que lastima te tengo.
 "Te tienes por más grande, miserable,
 Sólo porque has nacido en alto puesto?
 El lugar donde te hallas colocada
 Es el grande, tú no; desde el soberbio
 Monte do estas, no midas hasta el soto,
 Mira lo que hay de tu cabeza al suelo:
 Aunque ese monte crezca hasta el Olimpo,
 Serás malva, y no más, con todo eso,
 Desengañate, chica, no seas loca,
 Jamás es grande el que nació rastrero,
 Y el que alimenta un corazón mezquino,
 Es siempre bajo, aunque se suba al cielo."
 A tan fuerte sermón la pobre malva
 Que no esperaba tal razonamiento,
 Calló corrida, entre bejucos varios
 Sus desmayadas hojas escondiendo.

A la vez asomaba el sol radiante,
Decorando de grana el firmamento;
Y el arroyo, las flores, y las aves,
Cantaron de la palma el vencimiento.⁷⁴

The insignificant mallow, nestling in the grass of a lofty hill, is full of pride at her position and speaks with condescension to the palm tree on the plain below: "Do you consider yourself the greater merely because you were born in a high place? The place where you happen to be is great, not you." This poem is from the group of fables and epistolaries, in which Plácido again brings out the moral concept which his Spanish heritage had given him.

In the didactic style, the poet moralizes possibly, to soothe his own injured feelings when he was falsely accused. His fables reveal a proper sense of righteousness and justice, which he had also acquired inherently. In these works, the author remains in the background, while the man occupies the foreground. The fables show the moment in which he came to his proper senses and understood his environmental situation, of which he was a part no matter what methods he employed to escape it. He pondered on his situation and wept over it. It appears that he allowed himself to be a victim of his weaknesses.

⁷⁴ Plácido, "La Malva y la Palma," op. cit., p. 5.

El Cantaro de Juana is one of the best of the collection of fables. In this work, the author proposes the idea that those who are just oft times pay for the sinners. The poem is quoted in its entirety.

Tantas veces le prestó
Juana el cántaro a Vicente
Y él tantas veces sacó
Agua con él de la fuente,
Hasta que se lo quebro.

No pudiendo otro traer
Cuando Vicente confuso
Y Juana astuta mujer
Hizo cola y lo compuso
Como Dios lo dió a entender.

Luego prestóselo a Uberto,
El cual se lo trajo roto
(Por donde ya estaba abierto)
Y Juana armo un alboroto
Como si la hubiesen muerto.

El simple Uberto creyo
Ser suya a fe la averia
Por lo que palabra dió
De abonarlo al otro día
Y exactamente cumplió.

En cantaros y en amores
No se gana para sustos,
Pues como dicen autores
Acontece que los justos
Paguen por los pecadores.⁷⁵

Plácido's A Lince Desde la Prisión shows his ancestral and Spanish gifts in another light. Valor, love of country, ardor of liberty, relief of oppression, and love

75 Plácido, "El Cantaro de Juana," op. cit., pp. 55-56.

for the Omnipotent Father are manifested. The poem-an epistolary-is historical, descriptive, and, though a bit gruesome, picturesque.

He was a "cantador" and through his songs is heard the resonance of a great sonnet writer. He sang like a lyrical instrument; and, as he sang, his reveries and aspirations grew. The sonorous words, the descriptive adjectives, the delicate sensuous rhythms--all that he loved with so much eagerness and sincerity covered him like a raiment.

Along with Plácido's moral evolution was accomplished his artistic development, when he became no longer a vagabond. The legend of El Hijo de Maldicion is his most polished work; yet, the lengthy poem is far from his most beautiful or important work.

Influenced by Zorilla, the poet produced a chivalrous legend of Ramon Vidal de Beslu, a Catalan troubadour of the twelfth century, a poem, which bears the title of El Fallo de Hugo de Mataplana.

Another shorter legend in the Moorish style--El Bardo Cautivo--was published for the first time in Madrid, in the newspaper directed by a don Eduardo Asquerino.

Neither of the two works is of any particular literary value; however, both are poems of external beauty and perfection of style. They are reminiscent of poems by the

symbolists of the modernist movement of Spanish American LITERATURE Literature. There is also a slight touch of Verlaine and his school of poets. El Hijo de Maldición excels, especially, in this respect. The action is elaborate and the feeling is earnest. Only Plácido's fantasy could have put itself to the test in these works, which easily might be an example of the French "tour de force". For, in these works, the author used an obsolete style.

Plácido's sonnets are to be found in his first volume of poems, printed in Mantanzas on the Imprenta del Gobierno Y Marina. In this brief volume, the poet already showed considerable ability, and these works are not surpassed by those that were written in the days of his perfection.

The volume contains the famous sonnet, entitled A Una Ingrata, regarded as one of his most noteworthy productions.

An English translation:

To an Unresponsive Lady

Enough of love: if once my heart was thine,
 My youthful madness now has found a cure,
 Because, Celia, thy beauty, candid pure
 Is like the snow, dazzling, cold, crystalline.
 In these dwells not the sympathy divine,
 That of my ardent soul is e'er the lure,
 Either amid the shades of night obscure
 Or when the rays of sunshine thee entwine.

Naught would I have of love thou canst bestow
 Deaf to my woe, impassive to my plea
 With sprigs of myrtle I would deck aglow,
 A heart that blindly idolizes me:
 For my embraces, no goddess of snow;

For my kiss, a woman of fire, full, free.⁷⁶

The original:

A una Ingrata

Basta de amar: si un tiempo te quería,
Ya se acabó mi juvenil locura,
Porque es, Celia, tu candida hermosura
Como la nieve, deslumbrante y fría.

No encuentro en ti la extrema simpatía
Que ansiosa mi alma contemplar procura,
Ni a la sombra de la noche oscura,
Ni a la espléndida faz del claro día.

Amor no quiero como tú me amas,
Sorda a mis ayes, insensible al ruego;
Quiero de mirtos adornar con ramas

Un corazón que me idolatre ciego;
Quiero abrazar una mujer de llamas,
Quiero besar una mujer de fuego.⁷⁷

The sonnet, written to one who has spurned the author's affection, is explanatory and employs excellent similes to attain its purpose.

In the works is also found the sonnet, En los Días de Fela (after her death), in which the fourth verse of the first quarter is a reminder of Garcialaso:

Al grato son de tiplecillo blando,
Como en un tiempo "cuando Dios quería."⁷⁸

Plácido wrote innumerable sonnets to his friends on

⁷⁶ Plácido, "A una Ingrata," translated by Emilia Bernal, op. cit., p. 161.

⁷⁷ Plácido, "A una Ingrata" op. cit., p. 1.

⁷⁸ Plácido, "En los Días de Fela," op. cit., p. 74.

various occasions; he commemorated the death of an important personage, and addressed the rulers of Spain. Among the poems which fall under this classification are A Don Eduardo Torres, En el Aria de Asur, Al Aniversario de la Muerte de Napoleón, A Nicolás de Ayala, En la Muerte de Fela, A las Señoras Pantanelli y Rossi, and Muerte de César. Plácido wrote several odes and sonnets to Queen Isabel II and to Doña María Cristina de Borbon. One sonnet, in which the author hopes for peace in the Iberian peninsula and shows honor and glory to Christine, is quoted. Practically all the poems to the queens are of this nature. However, there often is apparent a strain of bitterness in the literary pieces to the governors.

En los Días

de

La Reina Gobernadora de España

Soneto

Oís, oís el cántico sonoro
 Que alzan los jénios en acorde acento,
 Y acompaña en el sacro firmamento
 La heroíca fama con su trompa de oro?

De las aves oís el són canoro
 El belicoso obus que agita el viento,
 Y esparcir por do quier vida y contento
 Las bellas ninfas del castalio coro?

Pues cuadro tal con celicos pinceles
 Trazó el Eterno, cuya voz divina
 Manda inmutable en sus decretos fieles,

Paz á la Iberia, á la discordia ruina,
 Dicha á los buenos, a Isabel laureles,

Y honor y gloria a la inmortal Cristina.⁷⁹

Among the numerous worthy ballads to be found within the pages of the first volume are A Grecia, one of his tributes to Greece; his ballad, Cora; and Xicotencal. The last-named is unrivaled by any other poem of its character in Cuban literature, not even excepting Zenea's Fidelia, according to literary critics. It is a remarkable romance with a historical theme. The Spaniard's gifts, so manifested in the Romancero, are reflected. Plácido has quite caught the spirit and movement of the old Spanish ballads. The poem reminds one of passages from Los Infantes de Larra and The Cid. Xicotencal, a young Tlascalan chief, has just triumphed over the warrior of Montezuma. He is being carried in a litter through his native city. His eyes happen to rest on some Aztec prisoners bound to stakes, in preparation for their being burned alive. Leaping down, the young chief frees the prisoners, bidding them return to Mexico with the message that his victories will not be stained by such cruelties as their monarch practices. The glories of victory are manifested in these lines:

Dispersas van por los campos
Las tropas de Moctezuma,
De sus dioses lamentando

⁷⁹ Plácido, "En los Días de la Reina Gobernadora de España," op. cit., p. 119.

El poco favor y ayuda:
 Mientras ceñida la frente
 De azules y blancas plumas,
 Sobre un palanquín de oro
 Que finas perlas dibujan,
 Tan brillantes que la vista,
 Heridas del sol, deslumbran,
 Entra glorioso en Tlascala
 El joven que de ellas triunfa;
 Himnos le dan de victoria,
 Y de aromas le perfuman
 Guerreros que le rodean.
 Y el pueblo que le circunda,
 A que contestan alegres
 Trescientas vírgenes puras:
 "Baldón y afrenta al vencido,
 "Loor y gloria al que triunfa."
 Hasta la espaciosa plaza
 Llega, donde le saludan
 Los ancianos Senadores,
 Y gracias mil le tributan.⁸⁰

Yet, superiority in battle does not allow the warrior to
 lose his benignity nor knowledge of human decency. As he
 sees the victims helpless, he says these words:

"Tornad a Méjico, esclavos;
 Nadie vuestra marcha turba,
 Decid a vuestro señor,
 Rendido ya veces muchas,
 Que el joven Jicotencal
 Crueldades como él no usa,
 Ni con sangre de cautivos
 Asesino el suelo inunda;
 Que el cacique de Tlascala
 Ni batir ni quemar gusta
 Tropas dispersas e inermes,
 Sino con armas, y juntas.
 Que armen flecheros más bravos,
 Y me encontrara en la lucha
 Con sólo una pica mía

80 Plácido, "Jicotencal," op. cit., p. 8.

Por cada trescientas tuyas;
 Que tema el funesto día,
 Que mi enojo a punto suba;
 Entonces, ni sobre el trono
 Su vida estará segura;
 Y que si los puentes corta
 Porque no vaya en su busca,
 Con Craneos de sus guerreros,
 Calzada haré en la laguna."⁸¹

The entire poem is both symbolic and impressionistic and deserves a high place in literature.

Plácido's feelings about liberty, expressed with all the ardor of African blood, are revealed in a sonnet on the death of the tyrant, Gesler. It is called La Muerte de Gesler. The poem pictures Tell standing exultantly over the quivering corpse of the tyrant, holding his bow as a symbol of freedom:

Sobre un monte de nieve trasparente,
 En el arco la diestra reclinada,
 Por un disco de fuego coronada
 Muestra Guillermo Tell la Heroica frente.⁸²

Gruesomely, he describes the death of one who has caused much unhappiness to many:

Yace en la playa el despota insolente,
 Con férrea vira al corazón clavada,
 Despidiendo al infierno acelerada
 El alma negra en forma de serpiente.

El calor le abandona; sus sangrientos
 Miembros lanza la tierra al Océano

⁸¹ Plácido, "Jicotencal," op. cit. p. 8.

⁸² Plácido, "La Muerte de Gesler," op. cit., p. 13.

Tornanle a echar las olas y los vientos.⁸³

There is no place in humanity for one who has ruled unjustly and oppressively:

No encuentra humanidad el inhumano;
Y hasta los insensibles elementos
Lanzan de sí los restos del tirano.⁸⁴

Still more pungent are the poet's words to the Mexican general, Adolfo de la Flor, which the latter is to read on reaching Mexican soil:

Go yes, go to the shores where liberty is; and on arriving at the beach draw forth my verses, bend your knees and touch them three times to the earth. Since my ill fortune and the seas prevent my enjoying the divine essence, may my songs enjoy it. And when you learn of my death, send dust moistened with your tears in a litter to some faithful friend and that shall be the most precious flower with which you can adorn my tomb.⁸⁵

Some days before the author learned of his sentence, his poem, A la Fatalidad, was written. No study nor discussion is ever made of Plácido without mention of this sonnet. The poem, in spite of the vulgarity of consonance, which was a defect of Plácido, is very beautiful and moving. It has been translated into several European languages. In it, the poet beseeches, hopes, and doubts. For what could he

⁸³ Plácido, "Jicotencal," op. cit., p. 8.

⁸⁴ Loc. cit.

⁸⁵ These are the words of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, cited by Alfred Coester, Literary History of Spanish America (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1916), p. 386.

have longed or hoped, after being sentenced and after being taken to the chapel, on the eve of his execution?

A la Fatalidad

Negra deidad que sin clemencia alguna
De espinas al nacer me circuiste,
Cual fuente clara cuya margen viste
Magüey silvestre y punzadora tuna;

Entre el materno talamo y la cuna
El férreo muro del honor pusiste;
Y acaso hasta las nubes me subiste,
Por verme descender desde la luna.

Sal de los antros del averno oscuros,
Sigue oprimiendo mi existir cuitado,
Que si sucumbo a tus decretos duros,

Diré como el ejército cruzado
Esclamo al divisar los rojos muros
De la santa Salem ... "Dios lo ha mandado!"⁸⁶

Despite his misfortune, thought the accused man, if God has ordered punishment, let His will be done.

As the author of such verses as Jicotencal, A la Justicia, A la Fatalidad, and sonnets to the rulers, it was only natural that Plácido should fall under the suspicion of the authorities when an uprising was scented in the year 1844. The circumstances which surrounded the death of the poet have been described; there is no need to repeat them. It has been said that on the way to the place of execution he recited verses of his own composition and proclaimed:

⁸⁶ Plácido, "La Fatalidad," op. cit., p. 4.

"I shall die singing like a Cuban nightingale."⁸⁷

After Plácido's death, there were put into circulation three fine poems, whose excellence, combined with the tragic circumstances of the author's end, did more to confer on him the name of poet than all the remainder of his work. These three works, Despedida a mi Madre, Adiós a Mi Lira, and Plegaria a Dios, have been the subject of controversy on the part of critics. They are supposed to have been written in the chapel on June 27, 1844. Considerable discussion as to the authenticity of these very excellent poetic contributions has taken place. On the day of his execution, he received several clerical visits as he was preparing himself to die in a Christian manner. Perhaps the priests may have been the motivating factor behind the poems. Menendez y Pelayo and many other critics have attributed the verses to Plácido, the one who, a majority believes, wrote them. Since he possessed such power of improvisation, he would have had time, after his visitors left, to compose these final Christian words.

In the aforementioned sonnet, Despedida a mi Madre, he bids his mother not to grieve; for his lyre utters its last sound to her memory while the mantle of religion covers

⁸⁷ These are the words of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, cited by Alfred Coester, op. cit., p. 386.

him:

Si la suerte fatal que me ha cabido,
Y el triste fin de mi sangrienta historia,
Al salir de esta vida transitoria
Deja tu corazón de muerte herido;

Baste de llanto: el ánimo aflijido
Recobre su quietud; moro en la gloria,
Y mi plácida lira a tu memoria
Lanza en la tumba su postrer sonido.

Sonido dulce, melodioso y santo,
Glorioso, espiritual, puro y divino,
Inocente, espontáneo como el llanto

Que vertiera al nacer: ya el cuello inclino!
Ya de la religion me cubre el manto!
Adiós, mi madre! adiós ... El Peregrino.⁸⁸

Plácido is tired of the burden of grief; he has one moment to utter words so penetratingly spiritual. It is his wish that his beloved mother neither repine nor weep! What a good Christian one must be to be accused and, yet, to be able to say that his soul dwells in bliss and that there is nothing to bewail! The essence of purity and divinity is embodied in these lines, when the poet says these words:

Enough of weeping: to harsh fate resign
Thy soul; I dwell in bliss and naught bewail;
N'er my calm lyre thy memory shall fail;
Within the tomb its final sound is thine:
A sound as white, melodious and low,
As glorious, holy, marvelous and free,
As innocent, spontaneous, as the cry
I breathed when I was born--I bow my head. Oh,
The mantle of the faith now covers me.—
Farewell, my brother--"The Pilgrim" I sigh.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Plácido, "Despedida a mi Madre," *op. cit.*, p. 379.

⁸⁹ Plácido, "Despedida a mi Madre," translated by Emilia Bernal, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

The second of the controversial poems, Adios a mi Lira, expresses, in noble words, the consolation which the cultivation of poetry has brought to him:

No entre el polvo de inmunda bartolina
 Quede la lira que canto inspirada
 De empíricos laureles coronada
 Las glorias de Isabel y de Cristina;
 La que brindo con gracia peregrina
 La Siempre Viva al cisne de Granada:
 No yazga en polvo, no quede colgada
 Del árbol santo de la Cruz divina

Omnipotente ser, Dios poderoso,
 Admitidla, Señor, que si no ha sido
 El plectro celestial esclarecido
 Con que os ensalza un querubín glorioso,
 No es tampoco el laúd prostituido
 De un criminal perverso y sanguinoso:
 Vuestro fue su destello luminoso,
 Vuestro será su postrimer sonido.

Vuestro será, Señor, no más canciones
 Profanas cantara mi estro fecundo:
 Ay! que llevo en la cabeza un mundo!
 Un mundo de escarmiento y de ilusiones,
 Un mundo muy distinto de este sueño,
 De este sueño letárgico y profundo
 Antro quizás de un Genio furibundo
 Sólo de llantos y amarguras dueño.

Un mundo de pura gloria
 De justicia y de heroísmo
 Que no es dado a los profanos
 Presentir mundo divino;
 Que los hombres no comprenden
 Que los ángeles han visto,
 Y aun con haberlo sonado
 No lo comprendo yo mismo.

Acaso entre breves horas
 Cuando divise el Empíreo,
 Postrado ante vuestro trono
 Veré mis sueños cumplidos!
 Y entonces vueltos los ojos
 A esta mansión de delitos,

Os daré infinitas gracias
Por haber de ella salido,

The poet speaks to God. He speaks of the queens; as he does so, he recalls his La Siempreviva, which won acclaim for him:

En tanto quede colgada
La causa de mi suplicio,
En un ramo sacrosanto
Del que hicisteis vos divino.

Adiós mi lira, a Dios, encomendada
Queda de hoy más: "a diós" yo te bendigo;
Por ti serena el ánima inspirada
Desprecia la crueldad de hado enemigo.
Los hombres te verán hoy consagrada,
Dios y mi último adiós quedan contigo,
Que entre Dios y la timba no se miente.
A diós, voy a morir ... Soy inocente!⁹⁰

His lyre, he declares, will not remain in the dust of a vile prison. He begs God to accept it. He has dreamt of a world of pure glory and justice, which men do not understand but which angels have seen. This is the world which he hopes to see within a few hours; and, then, he will be able to praise God and to thank him for removing him from this mansion of crime. It is the last stanza which is most affecting. Though death was about to take the unfortunate prisoner, he who was about to die still contended, "Yo soy inocente."

Farewell, my lyre, commended to God;
bless thee. My calm spirit, inspired by

⁹⁰ Plácido, "Adiós a mi Lira," op. cit., pp. 376-377.

thee, scorns the cruelty of hostile fate. Men will see thee consecrated today. God and my last farewell remain with thee, for between God and the tomb, one tells no lies. Farewell, I am going to die. I am innocent.⁹¹

The verse, Ay Que me Llevo en la Cabeza un Mundo, is true poetry. It is a verse that recalls a similar phrase, uttered by Andrea Chenier when he delivered his neck to the guillotine.

The third poem, Plegaria a Dios, is the most famous of all, by reason of its lofty sentiment and artistic form. Many have said that Plácido recited this prayer on the way to his execution. The version is from the text, Poesías Completas:

Ser de inmensa bondad, Dios poderoso,
A vos acudo en mi dolor vehemente;
Estended vuestro brazo omnipotente,
Rasgad de la calumnia el velo odioso,
Y arrancad este sello ignominioso
Con que el mundo manchar quiere mi frente.

Rey de los reyes, Dios de mis abuelos,
Vos sólo sois mi defensor, Dios mío.
Todo lo puede quien al mar sombrío
Olas y peces dio, luz a los cielos,
Fuego al sol, jiro al aire, al Norte hielos,
Vida a las plantas, movimiento al río.

Todo lo podéis vos, todo fenece
O se reanima a vuestra voz sagrada:
Fuera de vos, Señor, el todo es nada,
Que en la insondable eternidad perece,

⁹¹ Plácido, "Adios a mi Lira," loc. cit., translated by the writer.

Y aun en esa misma nada os obedece,
Pues de ella fue la humanidad creada.

Yo no os puedo engañar, Dios de clemencia,
Y pues vuestra etemal sabiduría
Ve al través de mi cuerpo el alma mía
Cual del aire a la clara, transparencia,
Estorbad que humillada la inocencia
Bata sus palmas la calumnia impia.

Estorbadlo, Señor, por la preciosa
Sangre vertida, que la culpa sella
Del pecado de Adán, o por aquella
Madre candida, dulce y amorosa,
Cuando envuelta en pesar, mustia y llorosa
Siguió tu muerte como heliaca estrella.

Mas si cuadra a tu suma omnipotencia
Que yo perezca cual malvado impió.
Y que los hombres mi cadaáver frió
Ultrajen con maligna complacencia,
Suene tu voz, y acabe mi existencia...⁹²
Cúmplase en mí tu voluntad, Dios mió.⁹²

What a good catholic and a true Christian Gabriel must have been to have brought forth such words when he was about to die innocently. His only concern was that the Lord's will be done. This work has all the author's manner. The poem is facile, sweet, sonorous, majestically divine and spiritual. It carries with it the retribution of sin, the solemnity, and religious zeal found in both the Spaniard and the Negro. The work arises elegantly and truthfully to funeral pomp and ceremony. Its movement, suggestions, and imploring supplications for mercy and pity make it appear as if a soul were

⁹² Plácido, "Plegaria a Dios," op. cit., p. 380.

stammering for recognition in God's kingdom. The author is tired of the unjust demands of life. There is only one wish which remains—that of speaking the language of eternity in everlasting rest.

In summation of the literary value of *Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés*, there are several things to remember. *Plácido* was a marvelous improviser. *Eligio de la Puente* pointed out that he possessed an innate desire for both harmony and imagery. *Menendez y Pelayo* recognized this quality in him also. Before he was intellectually developed, he was already a poet. *Plácido* was often at his best in short works. There is a definite lack of coherence in some of the writings of the poet, who was compelled to write a poem each day for sustenance. *Plácido's* defects were the consequences of his carelessness and his slight culture. His vocabulary was small, and at times some of his prosaisms were unbearable. When he was informed by his few literary critics of these deficiencies he strove to correct them. *Lope* and *Tirso* were his criteria. He loved the neo-classicists, *Quintana* and *Gallego* and was inspired by his contemporary, *Zorilla*. Nevertheless he would take a series of hollow adjectives, mythological names, and historical or Biblical allusions and mix them without any cause or without any particular effect. However, one must admit he is most pleasant to

read and can be followed with utmost facility. Supple, spontaneous verse came from his pen.

Menendez y Pelayo was compelled to admit that even in Placido's worst poetry there were indications of an elegant versifier. An example of the accuracy of this statement is evident in those verses in which the poet imitated Zorilla and his contemporaries, yet maintained the reader's attention as he did it.

CHAPTER IV
NICOLÁS GUILLEN, LEADER OF THE AFRO-
SPANISH SCHOOL OF POETRY

A. LIFE

Guillén, like Plácido, is Cuban. However, there are vast divergencies between the two, both in literary style and in their social backgrounds. Cuba can, today, boast of having one of the most important modern poets and interesting literary movements in the Western Hemisphere. The poet is Nicolás Guillén, leader of the school of Afro-Cuban poetry, which, during the past ten years, has become one of the most significant expressions in Cuban culture.

Guillén was born approximately one-half century after the deaths of José Manuel Valdés and Plácido, in Camaguey, Cuba, 1904. A law course, which was begun at the University of Havana, terminated early. Instead of a career as a barrister, the Cuban has been active as editor, lecturer, and radio announcer. As an editor in the government service during the Machado regime, Guillén was imprisoned for a short time because of his liberal opinions and writings. It is only natural that his work should express the protests and aspirations of an underprivileged class. As a politician, he ran for mayor of his native town in 1939 and polled a

surprisingly good vote. Yet, despite all other activities, Nicolás Guillén is, primarily, a poet and devotes most of his time to writing poetry. At this writing, the Cuban author is associated with the cultural and intellectual life of Cuba, the University of Havana, and several surrounding Latin American territories.

B. WORKS

The poetic contributions of Nicolás Guillén are of interest from several standpoints. His literary style and subject matter are totally different from the two authors already discussed. Guillén represents a modern school of thought, in which he expresses the emotions, sentiments, and the political-economic situation of his own race.

An intensely musical sense is an inherent characteristic of both the Negro and the Spaniard, and the quality is often reflected in the literature of the two racial groups. Even the elaborate and beautiful street cries of Havana are a testimony to this characteristic form of expression. Just as the North American Negro slaves developed spirituals, the Cubans have kept alive their own poetic forms. Nicolás Guillén's first book, Motivos de Son, published in Havana, 1930, had an immediate success; for it was filled with songs that struck a popular note. The author incorporated a few of these "sones"⁹³ in his next book, Sóngoro Cosongo, which was published in Havana in 1931.

This work embodied contemporary dance rhythms, popular ballads, and "sones," which were serious in intention

⁹³ A "son" is a Cuban dance.

and written with simplicity. The poems were proletarian in character. They were a vivid interpretation of the life of the masses of the Cuban people. Guillén's work has great significance, for it has given artistic form to the contribution of the Negroes and mulattoes to the culture of Latin America. Mulata and Negro Bembón, both examples of the "son," were popular songs bearing a relation to American "blues".

Mulata

Ya yo me enteré, mulata
mulata, ya sé que me dise
que yo tengo la narise
como nudo de cobbata.

Y fíjate bien que tu
no ere tan adelanta,
poque tu boca e bien grande
y tu pasa, colora.

Tanto tren con tu cueppo,
tanto tren;
tanto tren con tu boca,
tanto tren con tu sojo,
tanto tren;

Si tu supiera, mulata,
la bedda;
que yo con mi negra tengo
y no te quiero pa na.⁹⁴

And the other poem:

Negro Bembon

Po que te pone tan brabo

⁹⁴ Nicolás Guillén, "Mulata," Sóngoro Cosongo y otros Poemas (Havana: University of Havana Press, 1931), p. 120.

cuando te disen negro bembón,
 si tiene la boca santa,
 negro bembón?

Bembón así como ere
 tiene de to;
 Caridá te mantiene,
 te lo da to.

Te queja todavía,
 Negro bembón;
 sin pega y con harina,
 negro bembón;
 majagua de dril--blanco,
 negro bembón;
 sapato de do tono,
 negro bembón.

Bembón así como ere
 tiene de to;
 Caridá te mantiene,
 te lo da to.⁹⁵

Guillén, through this poem and others of its kind, proposed to manifest that color is neither a determining factor nor is character contingent upon it. In the second, the author focused attention upon an individual type, known to all as one who depends more on the generosity of others than on his own industriousness. Charity, in Negro Bembón, was the mistress of the subject of the poem.

Guillén's "sones" were often psychologically suggestive, as well as rhythmically convincing. Eucate Plata gave a picture of a girl searching for a husband of substantial means:

95 Nicolás Guillén, "Negro Bembón," op. cit., p. 123.

pero amo con hambre, biejo,
que ba.

contanto sapato nuevo,
que ba.

contatno relo, compadre
que ba.

contanto lujo mi negro,
que ba.⁹⁶

Sometimes, Guillén combined a dance and a love poem.

Si Tu Supiera had a refrain built on sibilance. The dance is the "songo," and this work was repeated in various forms to produce an effect of inherent incremental repetition.

Ay, Negra,
Si tú supiera
Anoche te bi pasa
y no quise que me biera.

A e tu le hara como a mi
que en cuanto no tube plata
te corrite de bachata
sin acodahte de mi.

Songoro, cosongo
songo be;
Songoro, cosongo,
de mamey;
songoro, la negra
baile bien;
songoro de uno
songoro de tre.⁹⁷

96 Nicolás Guillén, "Bucata Plata," cited by Pereda Valdés, Antología de Poesía Negra Americana (Santiago de Chile, 1936), p. 114.

97 Nicolás Guillén, "Si Tú Supiera," cited by Pereda Valdés, op. cit., p. 111.

This was a trite different from Dunbar's Negro Love Song, though he, too, tried to suggest a dance in his refrain:

Seen my lady home las' night,
 Jump back, honey, jump back.
 "Hel' huh han' an' sque'ze it tight,
 Jump back honey, jump back.
 Hyeahed huh sigh a little sigh,
 Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye,
 An' a smile go flittin' by--
 Jump back, honey, jump back.⁹⁸

One may ascertain that our poet endeavored to translate the very soul of the Cuban in his "sones". Too, he expressed typical attitudes and feelings with excellence. Yet, the most striking characteristic of this new poetry is rhythm.

It has been only within recent years that the Latin American Negro has developed any poetry comparable, in creative genius, to that of the North American Negro, with the exceptions of Plácido and Valdés. In the new works, eroticism, love of rhythm, racial mannerisms and susceptibilities prevail.

The Latin American Negro, like his North American brother, loves to sing and dance. It is this festival spirit of song and dance which Guillen reproduces. Sometimes, it is the languid sensualism of the Cuban "son"; sometimes, the mad

⁹⁸ Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Negro Love Song," cited by V. F. Calverton, Anthology of Negro Verse (New York: Modern Library, 1929), p. 5.

whirl of the rumba, or the stomp and the shout of more war-like measures, as the batuque. Guillén is able to express with words the contortions of the dance and the rhythm of the music. He employs the corrupt Spanish of the Negro and even some African words. But it is not necessary to understand the words; for, the rhythm tells all.

Tamba, tamba, tamba tamba,
Tamba del negro que tumba;
Tumba del negro caramba,
Caramba, que el negro tumba:
Yamba, yambo, yambambe.⁹⁹

This fragment from Canto Negro recalls the "boomlay, boomlay," of Vachel Linday's Congo. The sound effect of the Cuban poems is amazing. Each line is based on explosives, which give a characteristic "jazz" note and which reproduce the sound of the drum and percussion instruments. A kind of verbal surrealism, with apparently no pictorial value, is evident. Rhythm and sound predominate--nothing more.

In the Cuban dances, the music is primitive. The rhythmic elaboration of Dvorak's New World Symphony and Ravel's Bolero is not to be found in these poems.

Compare the delineation of rhythm by other writers of the Afro-Cuban school. Marcelino Arozarena, another writer of song and dance rhythms in verse, expresses more frenzied

⁹⁹ Nicolás Guillén, "Canto Negro," op. cit., p. 114.

eroticism than one finds in Guillén. In Carida, the mad whirl of the rumba is vividly described:

La epilepsia rimbombante que revuelve sus
entranas
el sopor electrizante que le endulza la emoción,
resquebraja su cintura
y la exprime con locura
en la etiopica dulzura del sabroso guanguanco,
que es embrujo en el reflujo de la sangre azucarada
Y es espasmo en el marasmo del trepidante bongo.¹⁰⁰

La Rumba, by Tallet, on the other hand, is the best visual representation of that dance.

como baila la rumba la negra Tomasa
como baila la rumba José Encarnación.
Ella mueve una nalga, ella mueve la otra,
el se estira, se encoge, dispara la grupa,
el vientre dispara, se agacha, camina
sobre el uno y el otro talon.¹⁰¹

Still another well known author, Gaston Figueira, gives not only the auditory values of the dance, the shuffle of the Negroes, the shouting of the crowd, and the instruments that accompany the dance, but the pictorial values and social background as well. The result is one of a verbal jazzy symphony. A line or two from his work, Batuque, gives some idea the author intended:

Batuque, batuque, batuque,
rimbombo

¹⁰⁰ Marcelino Arozarena, "Carida," cited by Pereda Valdes, op. cit., p. 103.

¹⁰¹ Eugenio Tallet, "La Rumba," cited by Ramón Guirao, Órbita de la Poesía Afrocubana (Havana, 1938), p. 65.

del bombo
 El jongo
 zumba
 y retumba
 Como en una noche del Congo.
 Chiqui-cha, chiqui-chá del maraca,
 caracaxa, kerekexe, canza.
 Y parece que la roja noche tropical
 se llena de un grito sediento:
 Bailemos y cantemos
 Majumbebe, majumbarila.¹⁰²

Note the strange words the poet uses. They are the mixture of two races. Here is a passage from the same poem, in which the reader can not only feel the movements of the dance but can actually see, as he reads, the revelry of those participating:

Bailemos y cantemos
 Ohe, oha, júije juija
 que mañana es carnival.
 Zumba y retumba del jongo,
 rimbombo del bombo,
 chiqui-cha, chiqui-chá del maraca,
 chiqui-cha, chiqui-cha, canza, kerekexe, caracaxa,
 el señor defengenio ya muerto está.¹⁰³

The chiqui-cha refrain is the sound made by the maracas, gourds filled with stones and rattled as an accompaniment to the dance.

The Samba, too, is portrayed through poetry. Gilka Machado, a woman poet of Brazil, has written an interpretation of it:

¹⁰² Gaston Figueira, "Batuque," cited by Pereda Valdés,
 op. cit., p. 13

¹⁰³ Loc. cit.

Mexendo com as ancas,
 batendo com os pes,
 trements os seios,
 Virados os olhos,
 os dentes espiando
 a todos e a tudo,
 brilhantes,
 brilhantes,
 por dentro dos labios,
 crioula ou cafusa,
 cabocla ou mulata
 mestica ou morena--
 nao te ama somente quem nunca te viu
 dansando,
 sambando,
 nas noites delua,
 mulher do Brasil.¹⁰⁴

These are but a few of the local Cuban folksongs and dance lyrics which Nicolás Guillén and his contemporaries have introduced into Cuban literature. Since acclaim has been accorded even to the infant stages of this type of verse, it is only natural to believe that one may look for other interesting forms to follow.

Critics of Latin American literature have stated, more than once, that Guillén's earlier poetry shows the influence of Villon and Baudelaire; for, many of his writings are steeped in social protest. His Marxist convictions led him to look for popular forms, in order to challenge a wide audience. Certain social patterns often caused Negroes to

¹⁰⁴ Gilka Machado, "Sambando," cited by Andrade Muricy, A Nova Literatura Brasileira, Critica e Antologia (Porto Alegre, 1936), p. 77.

turn in bitter disillusionment towards writing works of social protest, as well as those with bitter ironic tendencies. In the poet's third book, West Indies Ltd., Havana, 1934, his social awareness had deepened. The title poem had epical intentions. Guillén considered it transitional in quality; for, passages of the high style were united with a new kind of folk song, filled with irony and protest. In the poem, the author purported to attack his own people for their social pretensions and endeavored to sting them into a consciousness of the evils of exploitation and the reasons for their poverty. Note the sarcasm in the following lines, translated for the periodical Tomorrow by H. R. Hays:

West Indies. Coconuts, tobacco and raw spirits.
This is a country, impotent and obscure,
Liberal and conservative,
Where cattle graze and sugar flows
And where it is always hard to live.

The sun here diminishes all things
From the mind down to the roses.
Beneath our shining suits of drill
We are wearing loincloths still.¹⁰⁵

He lashes at the local snobs:

I laugh in your face, aristocrat of the Antilles,
Ape, hopping from tree to tree,
Clown, in a sweat for fear you'll put your foot
in it
And you always do--up to your knee.¹⁰⁶

105 Nicolás Guillén, "West Indies Ltd.," translated by H. R. Hays, Tomorrow (New York: Creative Age Press, 1942), p.45.
106 Loc. cit.

He does not spare exploiters:

Here are the servitors of Mr. Babbitt
 Here are those who educate his sons at West Point
 Here are those who say, "Hello Baby"
 And smoke 'Chesterfields' and 'Lucky Strikes'
 Here are the ones who dance 'fox trots'
 The boys of the jazzband
 And the vacationists from Miami and Palm Beach.¹⁰⁷

And the poem swings into a "son":

They kill me when I'm not working
 Working they kill me, too.
 Always they kill me, they kill me,
 Always they kill me, they kill me,
 Always they kill me, they kill me.
 One day I saw a man watching
 Watching the new sun rise.
 And that man was sad and sober
 Because he had no eyes. Ay.
 The blind they live in darkness
 When the sun comes up.
 When the sun comes up.¹⁰⁸

In this poem, Guillén has synthesized Cuba's difficult situation and tragic history. There was political violence and poverty:

West Indies. Coconuts, tobacco and raw spirits.
 This is a country, omnipotent and obscure,
 Liberal and conservative,
 And where it is always hard to live.¹⁰⁹

frustration:

They kill me when I'm not working,
 Working they kill me too.¹¹⁰

107 Nicolás Guillén, "West Indies Ltd.," op. cit. p. 45.

108 Loc. cit.

109 Guillén, "West Indies Ltd.," translated by H. R. Hays, op. cit., p. 45.

110 Ibid., p. 45.

tropical color:

Oh pure hidden sun,
Prisoner in the arch of the tropics.
Oh round and clear moon,
Over the dreams of the monkey.¹¹¹

irony:

Ay. The blind they live in darkness
When the sun comes up.¹¹²

Guillén has extracted the essence of a colonial situation and made it into poetry filled with lyric indignation and noble invective.

Another poem to be found in West Indies Ltd., one which has attracted considerable attention, is Dos Abuelos. Guillén does not wish to be classified as a Negro writer. He is vibrantly aware of his dual heritage--articulately so in this poem.

Sombras que solo yo veo
me escoltan mis dos abuelos.

Lanza con punta de hueso
tambor de cuero y madera:
Mi abuelo negro.

Gorguera en el cuello ancho,
gris armadura guerrera:
mi abuelo blando.¹¹³

So conscious is he of the fusion that he struggles to give each ancestor equal esteem. The following stanza is most

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 47.

¹¹³ Nicolás Guillén, "Dos Abuelos," op. cit., p. 90.

impressive in its depiction of the two heritages. The author manifested with transcendent skill and undeniable thought dual backgrounds--not one in contrast to the other, but two backgrounds which formed a composite. That composite characterizes Negro Latin American poetry! And, in the case of Guillén, it forms the poetic qualities of Afro-Cuban poetry:

Africa de selvas húmedas
y de gordos gongos sordos
-Me muero.

(Dice mi abuelo negro)
Aguaprieta de caimanes,
verdes mañanas de cocos.

Me canso
(Dice mi abuelo blanco)
Oh velas de amargo viento,
galeón ardiendo en oro.

-Me muero.
(Dice mi abuelo negro)
Oh costas de cuello virgen,
enganadas de abalorios.

-Me canso
(Dice mi abuelo blanco)¹¹⁴

Dejected expectation of a future life in contrast to the present cruel existence, is quite evident:

Qué de barcos, qué de barcos!
Qué de negros, que de negros!
Qué latigo el del negrero!
Sangre? Sangre. Lanto? Lanto--
madregadas vacías,
y atardeceres de ingenio,
y una gran voz, fuerte voz
despedazando el silencio.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Guillén, "Dos Abuelos," op. cit., p. 91.

¹¹⁵ Loc. cit.

And two people become one:

Don Frederico me grita,
 Y Taita Facundo calla:
 los dos en la noche suenan,
 y andan, andan,
 Yo los junto.
 Facundo Los dos se abrazan
 Los dos suspiran. Los dos
 las fuertes cabezas alzan,
 los dos del mismo tamaño
 bajo las estrellas altas;
 los dos del mismo tamaño
 ansia negra y ansia blanca,
 los dos del mismo tamaño,
 gritan. Suenan. Lloran. Cantan.
 Cantan--Cantan--Cantan.116

The author feels himself in a position to interpret emotions common to both racial strains. It is his wish to write Cuban--not Negro poetry. And, indeed, he has been an inspiration to all the Spanish-speaking populations of mixed blood. He speaks for the other Caribbean Islands, as well as Cuba, "and has stimulated other poets, such as Pales Matos of Puerto Rico."117

It is Guillén who has made African folklore, which is still current in the Antilles, popular as artistic material. Many of the Cuban folk songs are much nearer to African origins. They are filled with African origins. A charm to kill snakes, for instance, harks back to the Congo. Today,

116 Guillén, "Dos Abuelos", op. cit., p. 91.

117 Hays, op. cit., p. 47.

African words are still used by the modern poets, often when the meaning has been lost, for sound values alone. Certain pagan rites have also survived. In Cuba, it is Mother Divine, Yemaya, or some other African deity that forms the center of Negro cults. Therefore, really typical Afro-Cuban poetry of a "religious" nature deals with magic and magic charms. Ortíz gave Guillén's Sensemaya, found in West Indies Ltd., as a characteristic example. The poem was an adaptation of a traditional magical incantation to protect a man killing a snake. "The African refrain words were used for their sound value, a typical Afro-Cuban device."¹¹⁸ Most of these words have already lost their meaning for the modern Cuban; yet, they live on in popular tradition. Mayombe referred to a native of a region of the French Congo:¹¹⁹

Mayombe-bombe-mayombe,
 Mayombe-bombe-mayombe,
 Mayombe-bombe-mayombe,
 Mayombe-bombe-mayombe.

La cuelbra tiene los ojos de vidrio,
 la cuelbra viene, y se enrada en un palo
 con sus ojos de vidrio, en un palo
 con sus ojos de vidrio.
 La culebra camina sin patas;
 la culebra se esconde en la yerba;
 caminando se esconde en la yerba,
 caminando sin patas.

¹¹⁸ Hays, op. cit., p. 46.

¹¹⁹ Hays, op. cit., p. 46.

Mayombe-bombe-mayombe.
 Mayombe-bombe-mayombe.
 Mayombe-bombe-mayombe.
 Mayombe-bombe-mayombe.

Tu le das con el hacha, y se muere;
 dale ya.
 No le des con el pie, que te muerde,
 no le des con el pie, que se va.

Sensemaya, la culebra.
 Sensemaya.
 Sensemaya, con sus ojos,
 Sensemaya.
 Sensemaya, con su lengua,
 Sensemaya.
 Sensemaya, con su boca,
 Sensemaya.

La culebra muerta no puede comer:
 la culebra muerta no puede silbar:
 no puede caminar,
 no puede correr.
 La culebra muerta no puede mirar;
 La culebra muerta no puede beber:
 no puede respirar,
 no puede morder;

Mayombe-bombe-mayombe
 Sensemaya, La Culebra
 Mayombe-bombe-mayombe.
 Sensemaya, la culebra
 Mayombe-bombe-mayombe.
 Se sensemaya, se murió.120

A certain voodooism, frenzied emotion, and eroticism may be discerned.

Primitive impulses are strong in Guillén's work--much more so than in the poetry of the North American Negro poets, who have been absorbed into an industrial civilization.

120 Guillén, "Sensamaya," op. cit., p. 100.

An interesting comparison could be made of Countee Cullen's rather self-conscious Heritage, which has qualities similar to those in Guillén's poem, with either Sensemaya or Balada del Guije. The Guije is a malignant Afro-Cuban water spirit, and Guillén employs weird witchery, sensuousness, and associative images:

Neque, que se vaya el neque!
Guije, que se vaya el guije

Las turbias aguas del río
son hondas, y tienen muertos;
carapachos de tortuga,
cabezas de niños negros!
De noche, saca sus brazos
el río y rasga el silencio
con sus uñas, que son unas
de cocodrilo frenético.
Bajo el grito de los astros,
bajo una luna de incendio,
ladra el río entre las piedras,
y con invisibles dedos,
sacude el arco del puente
y estrangula a los viajeros.

Neque, que se vaya el neque
Guije, que se vaya el guije.¹²¹

It is evident that African folklore is still a living thing. The primitive drum beats of the Congo echo; magic, and primitive ritual are dominant in these types of poetry.

It is in the poetry of racial protest that recent Latin American Negro poetry bears the closest resemblance to

¹²¹ Guillén, "La Balada del Guije," op. cit., p. 105.

that of North America. All the disapprobation and social exhortation mentioned in the introduction to this study was evident in Guillén's last work, Cantos para Soldados y Sonos para Turistas, published in Mexico City, 1937. In this work, the author's poetic development continued.. The poems were divided into two series. Military tyranny and bloodshed, to which Cuba has often been a prey, was to be found in the first series of songs. The second group was one of satires, in which José Ramón Cantaliso sang to the tourists, painting a picture of that part of Cuba which is never seen from Sloppy Joe's or the Havana Club. Many influences have gone into Guillén's works. Like all Latin American countries, Cuba has had its symbolists, its introspective artists of the Samain School but, it also has had Martí, the poet revolutionary, whose memory keeps alive a more militant tradition. The United States has its Langston Hughes, its Charles McKay; Cuba has its Regino Pedroso; and Argentina claims Casildo Thompson--all of whom use the pen to fight against racial injustices. Nicolás Guillén, too, writes of the race problem. The slave ship, far from symbolizing hope and redemption as it did for Phyllis Wheatley, is a shadow that still hangs over him; the slaves shout and sing to unburden their souls. Sublimation of the Negro's sorrow is always evident in some form in a Negro author's work. No

matter what circumstances surround him, the tragedy of his race is not forgotten. As he remembers, he thinks penetratingly, not only about his own problems but of those of society as well.

From the first series of Cantos para Soldados y para Turistas comes a poem which is an excellent example of an ironical observation of life:

Soldado Muerto

-Que bala lo mataría
 -Nadie lo sabe.
 -En que pueblo nacería?
 -En Jovellanos, dijeron.
 -Como fue que lo trajeron?
 -Estaba muerto en la vía,
 y otros soldados lo vieron.
 -Que bala lo mataría.

La novia viene, y lo besa;
 llorando, la madre viene.
 Cuando llega el capitán,
 sólo dice:
 -Que lo entierren.

Chin! Chin! Chin!
 Aquí va el soldado muerto.
 Chin! Chin! Chin!
 De la calle lo trajeron.
 Chin! Chin! Chin!
 El soldado es lo de menos.
 Chin! Chin! Chin!
 Que Mas Soldados Tenemos.¹²²

In Diana, from the same book, which Hays translates as

¹²² Nicolás Guillén, "Soldado Muerto," Cantos para Soldados y para Turistas (Mexico City, 1937), p. 15.

Reveille at Daybreak, Guillén, like Lorca, has returned to the early Spanish romances. With bitter intensity, he says these words:

La diana de madrugada,
va, con alfileres rojos,
hincando todos los ojos.
La diana de madrugada.

Levanta en peso el cuartel
con lo soldados consados.
Van saliendo los soldados.
Levanta en peso el cuartel.

Ay diana, ya tocarás
de madrugada, algun dia,
tu toque de rebeldia.
Ay diana, ya tocaras.

Fiera, fuerte, destada,
diana en corneta de fuego,
diana del pobre y del ciego,
diana de la madrugada.¹²³

Guillén, unlike Lorca, does not lean, with a certain sadistic relish, on scenes of blood to give his poetry force. His energy and drive come from a more broadly human and a more deeply social understanding.

Frustration, which often results from incomprehension as to the reasons for racial difference, is evident in the poem, No Sé Por Qué Piensas. One soldier says to another (perhaps after noticing some discriminative policy):

¹²³ Guillén, "Diana," op. cit., p. 21.

No Sé Por Qué Piensas Tú

-No sé por qué piensas tú,
soldado, que te odio yo,
si somos la misma cosa,
yo tú.

Tú eres pobre, lo soy yo,
soy de abajo, lo eres tu:
de donde has sacado tú,
soldado, que te odio yo?

Me duele que a veces tu
te olvides de quien soy yo;
caramba, si yo soy tu,
lo mismo que tú eres yo.

Pero no por eso yo
he de malquererte, tú:
si somos la misma cosa
yo,
tú,
no sé por qué piensas tú,
soldado, que te odio yo.

Ya nos veremos yo y tú,
juntos en la misma calle,
hombre con hombre, tú y yo
Sin odios, ni yo ni tú,
pero sabiendo tú y yo
abonde vamos yo y tu.

No sé por qué piensas tú,
soldado que te odio yo.¹²⁴

One more poem from this group, Fusilamento, treats of a man who is about to shot, apparently for no tangible cause.

Fusilamiento

I

Van a fusilar

¹²⁴ Nicolás Guillén, "No Sé Qué Piensas Tú," op. cit., p. 18.

a un hombre que tiene los brazos atados;
 hay cuatro soldados
 para disparar.
 Son cuatro soldados
 callados,
 que estan amarrados,
 lo mismo que el hombre amarrado que van a matar.

II

-Puedes escapar?
 -No puedo correr
 -Ya van a tirar
 -Que vamos a hacer
 -Quizá los rifles no esten cargados--
 -Seis balas tienen de fiero plomo
 -Quizá no tiren esos soldados
 -Eres un tonto de tomo y lomo.

III

Tiraron.
 (Cómo fue que pudieron tirar)
 Mataron.
 (Cómo fue que pudieron matar?)
 Eran cuatro soldados
 callados,
 y les hizo una seña, bajando su sable, un señor
 oficial;
 eran cuatro soldados
 atados,
 lo mismo que el hombre que fueron los cuatro a
 matar.¹²⁵

Guillén searched for a more heroic, rugged tradition. The quest led him to Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Villon. It was the last-named author of whom one was reminded in the second series of the work, Cantos para Turistas.

Cantaliso, literally translated "singer of truth,"

¹²⁵ Guillén, "Fusilamiento," op. cit., p. 20.



was a ragged Negro minstrel with a guitar, a kind of modern Villon. These songs often echoed the bitter Villon ballads. The author used Cantaliso as the protagonist, who sang songs to which the tourists could not dance. By this method, the author achieved a tragic irony, which he exploited to the fullest extent. Note the mediums of thought in the following:

Cantaliso en un Bar

(Los turistas en el bar;
Cantaliso, su guitarra,
y un son que comienza a andar)

-No me paguen porque cante
lo que no les cantaré:
ahora tendrán que escucharme
todo lo que antes callé.

Quién los llamó
Gasten su plata,
beben su alcol,
cómprense un guiro,
pero a mí no,
pero a mí no,
pero a mí no.

Todos estos yanquis rojos
son hijos de un camaron,
y los pario una botella,
una botella de ron.

Quién los llamó?
Ustedes viven,
me muero yo,
comen y beben,
pero yo no,
pero yo no,
pero yo no.

Aunque soy un pobre negro,
 sé que el mundo no anda bien;
 ay, yo conozco un mecanico,
 que lo puedo componer.
 Quién los llamó?
 Cuando regresen
 a Nuevo York,
 mándenme pobres
 como soy yo,
 como soy yo,
 A ellos les daré mi mano,
 Y con ellos cantaré,
 porque el canto que ellos saben
 es el mismo que yo sé.¹²⁶

Cantaliso employed the disguise of a master of ceremonies, introducing the sick, the poor, and the hungry. Satirically, he reminded the customers that what they spent on rum in one evening could have cured Juana's illness, or paid the rent on the insalubrious quarter in which Louis, Carlos, Noberto, and Pedro all lived. The poem, Visita a un Solar, manifests, excellently, these factors:

Visita a un Solar

(Turistas en un solar. Canta Cantaliso un son que no se puede bailar)

-Mejor que en hotel de lujo
 quédense en este solar;
 aquí encontraran de sobra
 lo que allá no han de encontrar.
 Voy a presentar, señores,
 a Juan Cocinero:
 tiene una mesa, tiene una silla,
 tiene unal silla, tiene una mesa,
 y un reverbero.

¹²⁶ Guillén, "Cantaliso en un Bar," Op. cit., p. 50.

El reverbero esta sin candela,
 muy disgustado con la cazuela.
 Verán que alegre, que placentero,
 que alimentado, que complacido,
 pasa su vid Juan Cocinero!

Juan Cocinero interrupts

-Con lo que un yanquí se tome
 de una visita a la barra,
 to'un año cualquiera come.

Sigue el Son

- éste es Luis, el caramelero;
 y éste es Carlos, el isleno,
 y aquel negro
 se llama Pedro Martinez,
 y aquel otro
 Noberto Soto,
 Y aquella negro de más alla,
 Petra sarda.
 Todos viven en un cuatro,
 seguramente
 porque sale mas barato.
 Que gente,
 Que gente tan consecuente.

Todos a Coro

Con lo que una turista traga
 nada más que en aguardiente,
 cualquiera un cuarto se paga!

Sigue el Son

Y la que lose señores,
 sobre esa cama,
 se llama Juana:
 tuberculosis en tercer grado,
 de un constipado
 muy mal cuidado.
 La muy idiota pasaba el día
 sin un bocado.
 Que boberia!
 Tanta comida que se ha botado!

Todos a Coro

-Con lo que un yanquí ha gastado
no mas que en comprar botellas,
si hubiera Juana curado.

Termina el Son

Turistas, quédense aquí,
que voy a hacerlos gozar;
turistas, quedense aquí,
que voy a hacerlos gozar;
cantándoles sonos, sonos
que no se pueden bailara.¹²⁷

Cantaliso is a lyric embodiment of the underprivileged. In fact, the whole series of poems is masterly, both for the ease and spontaneity of form and for pungency. Guillén has made the popular song dramatic. There is the absence of subjective self-pity that often weakens writings of social inspiration and, in its stead, something vivid and lasting has been created.

Cantos para Soldados y para Turistas marks an evolution in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén; for, he has elevated himself from the youthful sensuality and gayety of his rhythmic dance poems, to a position as a social critic of strength and intensity. Guillén merits a place, along with Richard Wright and Langston Hughes of the United States, as an interpreter of the race. Because of his varied ability, his

¹²⁷ Guillén, "Visita a un Solar," op. cit., p. 55.

success in uniting traditional technical mastery with emotions of the people, his interpretation of his double heritage, Guillén is considered by the Cuban critic, Juan Marinello, to be the most Cuban of contemporary poets. And he adds, in commenting on Cantos para Soldados y para Turistas,

There is something else, a crowning achievement in this book: a poetry which truly merits the epithet of classic-classic by reason of its feeling for the multiplicity of life, classic by reason of its sustained and lofty tone, classic by reason of the integrity of its purpose and the sovereignty of the will.¹²⁸

In conclusion, Nicolás Guillén is an author who possesses the talent to write poems derived from Afro-Cuban inspiration. He is also able, with considerable skill, to write ballads which are close to the modern Spanish school and which embody social and psychological elements. Regarding his technic, one easily discovers that the man is not an innovator. "He wishes to be read by all types of people, and he seeks to use those forms which these classes can read with most facility."¹²⁹ It was the simple rhythmic couplets which were employed in his ballads and popular songs:

Neque que se vaya el neque

¹²⁸ Marinello, op. cit., p. 90.

¹²⁹ Hays, op. cit., p. 47.

Guije, que se vaya el guije.¹³⁰

Sometimes, he uses the octosyllabic narrative line, forms equivalent to our "Tin Pan Alley" lyric:

Tamba, tamba, tamba, tamba,
Tamba del negro que tumba.¹³¹

And he occasionally returns to the classic ballad form:

Ay
Vendrás a la cama dura
donde se pudre el mendigo.
Amigo--gritaras--Amigo
Vendrás a la cama dura.¹³²

Another mechanical device is the author's use of images. One thinks back to the aromatic tendencies of Plácido's letrillas. Guillén was alert to his environment; luscious Cuban fruits, palm trees, and the sea figure in his poetry. Especially does this richness predominate when he speaks of tropic light:

Traversing
With a great red arrow
The heart of the forests
And the flesh of the rivers.¹³³

Or:

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- 130 Nicolás Guillén, "Sensamaya," West Indies Ltd. (Havana, 1937), p. 20.
131 Nicolás Guillén, "Canto Negro," Sóngoro Cosongo y Otros Poemas (Havana: University of Havana Press, 1931), p. 29.
132 Nicolás Guillén, "West Indies," West Indies Ltd. (Havana: University of Havana Press, 1937), p. 10.
133 Nicolás Guillén, "West Indies," translated by H. R. Hays, Tomorrow (New York: Creative Age Press, 1942), p. 45.

Fists that you give me
 To crack coconuts like a little angry God,
 Eyes that you give me
 To light up the sleep of my tigers,
 Hearing you give me to listen for
 The sound of distant hoofbeats on the earth.¹³⁴

Often Guillén runs away with himself. Images are used to such an extent that the work becomes stilted and mosaic:

Enanos de ombligo enorme
 oyeblan las aguas inquietas.¹³⁵

Or:

sus cortas piernas, torcidas,
 sus largas orejas, rectas
 Ah, que se comen mi niño
 de carnes puras y negras
 y que le beben la sangre.¹³⁶

The latter lines are ridiculous. Images like these are not decorative; they merely display a sensuous quality which is characteristic of most Negro sensitivity.

Guillén has searched for a popular form, without retrogressing from the great poetic achievements of the past. He has employed a simple, dignified style and has demonstrated that artistically satisfying poetry can still be written. It is a situation such as that of the starving sugar worker that spurs him to anger:

134 Loc. cit. *Nicolas Guillén, "West Indies," op. cit. p. 48.*

135 Nicolas Guillén, "La Balada del Guije," West Indies Ltd. (Havana: University of Havana Press, 1937). p. 29.

136 Loc. cit.

El negro
junto al cañaveral.

El yanquí
sobre el cañaveral.

La tierra
bajo el cañaveral.

Sangre
que se nos va.¹³⁷

His acid ironies remind one of the scorn which Rimbaud used on the bourgeoisie of his time. When Guillén calls his compatriots servile "maracas," rattling for the edification of the tourists, or when he mocks the white-skinned mulatto for looking down upon his darker brothers, he shows the keenness of his wit and the breadth of his intelligence.

The poetry of Nicolás Guillén brings with it the feel of the Caribbean area. He has dramatized the inhabitants' emotions in his "sones" and their political economic situation in his later works. He has done so accurately and memorably. His interpretations contribute a psychological understanding which is of profound interest to all who are concerned with the problems of Latin-America. Nicolás Guillén is a national poet and a mature artist, from whom much may yet be expected in the years to come.

¹³⁷ Nicolás Guillén, "Caña," West Indies Ltd. (Havana: University of Havana Press, 1934), p. 24.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been to analyze the major literary contributions of three Negro Latin American poets; namely, José Manuel Valdés, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, and Nicolás Guillén, who were exponents of distinct periods of Spanish American culture. Yet, each has echoed the sentiments of the environments of which they were a part, and has proved himself worthy of exhaustive study.

José Manuel Valdés, physician, poet, philosopher, Latinist, and prominent figure in Lima society at the dawn of the Republic, became a part of the national life of Peru. He did so by means of a concatenation of circumstances that served to indicate the series of steps through which he had to pass in his desire to break race prejudice, at least in part. Though he was born a mulatto, his earlier years were spent struggling against slave legislation, which he succeeded in overcoming--thanks to that principal of social justice which was beginning to be understood in America. The Republican regime gave him human dignity and made of him a deputy. He who had begun almost as a blood-letter came to be the first physician of the capital and, according to Marcelino Menendez y Pelayo, the most outstanding Peruvian poet of the period. Valdés loved and extolled in verse the

new form of government. In addition, he assimilated the essence of Catholicism. José Manuel Valdés, then, was important not only from the national point of view but, also from the continental; for he was the first colored man to attain an elevated social position and to win for himself cultural esteem, which far excelled that of Jupiter Hammon, Phyllis Wheatley, or Silva Albarenga. Valdés will be immortal in the pages of Peruvian literature.

It was not the will of Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés to allow himself to become mired in the bog of human misery. It was his wish to elevate himself and to recover his natural candor. Few had time to give attention to this man, born an illegitimate and mulatto; but when his genius began to come forth and shine, mankind became attentive. Only a minority, like Gonzalez del Valle, Valdés Machuca, and a few others, would lend him that which he needed to quench an insatiable thirst for knowledge. It must have been intensely heart-breaking to ascertain the selfish attitude on the part of the people, who enjoyed his works but humiliated him at every opportunity.

He who wrote poems for Martinez de la Rosa, Padilla and Pelayo, Christina, and Isabel the Second should have been the recipient for all that fame could bestow. Instead, he was accused of treason. Plácido was in love with any

idea of reform which he felt to be good and beneficial. He sang like a lyrical instrument and, as he sang, his reveries and aspirations grew. The sonorous words, descriptive adjectives, and delicate sensuous rhythms were loved arduously and sincerely by the Cuban martyr. All that he loved covered him like a raiment, delightfully, leading his reason astray and exalting his sentiments. The world, which could not understand how the mind of a poet functioned, believed that he sang for the price of gold; yet, he sang for a cause. His contemporaries had only malicious retorts for him. "Mulatto," "traitor," "renegade" they hurled at him. Only the thinkers, only the righteous, only the poets would raise their eyes ardently to the Heavenly Father and utter, "Brother".

The Cuban, Nicolás Guillén, who, at this writing, is still living, shows himself particularly adept in a type of Hispanic-African interpretation. With his extensive knowledge of Spanish literature, he has been able to give elegance and precision to Negro motifs, notably in his masterly treatment of dramatic scenes and humorous workaday episodes. In his first two books, he gave lyric dignity to popular songs, dances, and street cries. Yet, he was not content with mere poetic externals, or even profound interpretations of the Negro soul. He carries his art still farther in Cantos para Soldados y para Turistas, in which he expresses a profound

feeling of human solidarity that goes beyond racial differences and national boundaries. In this work, he became a classic poet. He not only showed clear understanding of his art and an absolute control of his technic but had some very definite ideas to propound. Because of his political significance, Guillén's work has had a wide influence. He represents one of the newest movements in Latin American poetry and has done more than any other single artist to lay the foundation for a contemporary Negro culture.

Though the contributions of writers of both African and Spanish descent are relatively small, those who have attempted to write have done so with a great degree of success.

José Manuel Valdés, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, and Nicolás Guillén have written poetry which is a genuine product of American soil. Spanish America achieved her literary independence from Spain. She is, only now, foregoing her French models. Though there is little to compare with some of the great Spanish classics, Spanish America is making a definite cultural contribution. Valdés used European technics and subject matter. He was not carried away by racial exhortations or by the exotic. Valdés remained within the limits of European traditions and produced excellent artistic poetry. However, the other two authors, with whom this thesis concerns itself, perceived that there is poetic beauty

in the elemental forces of life and death, in concepts of the human brain, and in all created things. Above all, they found beauty in their native American scene.

José Manuel Valdés, the Peruvian; Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, the Cuban; and Nicolás Guillén all have made poetic landmarks and will be immortal. What future literary currents will develop from other Negro Latin-American authors remains to be seen.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Jacquelyn White-Baskin has been read and approved by two members of the Department of Modern Languages.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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Date


Signature of Adviser