

**Frederick Luciani, ed. and tr., *José María Heredia in New York, 1823–1825: An Exiled Cuban Poet in the Age of Revolution. Selected Letters and Verse*, State University of New York Press, 2020. Pbk 276pp. ISBN: 9781438479842.**

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Niagara, your terror sublime alone  
 Could give me back the gift divine  
 That sorrow had me denied

José María Heredia (Cuba 1803–Mexico 1839) was the first Cuban poet of renown in the United States. In 1827 a lengthy fragment of his ode to Niagara Falls appeared in *The National Reader*, a textbook for US schoolchildren, and in 1845 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow included all of it in his influential compilation *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* (1845). Heredia's poetry exemplified the lyrical romanticism of his age, lush in its portrayal of landscapes, and a veritable waterfall of emotions, feelings, ardour, passion and zeal. Heredia's poetry circulated in Cuba during his lifetime. Brimming in passion, his poems became pillars of patriotic literature.

This anthology of poems and letters focuses on Heredia's years in New York, during which he wrote his best and best-known poetry. In these poems and in his letters, he narrated his life, its political context and its relationship to Cuba and the United States. Luciani, their editor and translator, drew on the collections of the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami Libraries and Harvard University's Houghton Library. He also provides a thoughtful and informative introductory essay to shed light on nine Heredia poems, presented in Spanish and English, and 130 printed pages of translated letters.

Every exile is at some point Janus-faced, looking around at his country of refuge and looking back upon his country of origin. Mesmerised by the evolution of the early American Republic, Heredia wrote this ode to Washington:

First in peace and war,  
 And in your countrymen's hearts,  
 And in the veneration of the world;  
 Replica of God upon the earth,  
 Liberator, legislator, just...

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Heredia's skill as a describer of the environment made him also an excellent travel writer. His letters to his mother and his uncle feature insightful and admiring characterisations of the land and people whom he encountered, with flights of ecstasy regarding the Erie Canal, waterworks and other engineering marvels everywhere, the efficacy of firefighting departments in Philadelphia and New York, and his witnessing of political contestation not repressed by police or military.

However, in common with many exiles, he complained bitterly to his uncle (17 July 1824) about how hard it had been to "make some progress in their most horrid language", and to his mother (4 March 1825) about the "destructive climate" that ill affected his health and would soon propel him to move to Mexico. There was ambivalence between his personal discomfort in, and his public admiration for, the United States.

Heredia, the fiery poet laureate of Cuban revolutionaries of all times, is direct and unyielding in "The Exile's Hymn", where he foretells what decades later will be the theme of Cuba's national anthem ("que morir por la patria es vivir"):

Vale más a la espada enemiga  
 presentar el impávido pecho, ...  
 siempre vence quien sabe morir.

However, Heredia's real and imagined experience of Cuba also set up a clash between the personal and the political within him. He fled Cuba in 1823 to avoid arrest for his engagement in the Soles y Rayos de Bolívar conspiracy activities, for which he would be banned from Cuba – a flight at odds with the stanzas in the poem above. As he was fleeing, he wrote (6 November 1823) to the investigative judge pleading his case. He had had "not even the faintest idea of contributing to a conflagration of my country in civil war" nor had it "ever entered my heart". Months later, he informed his uncle, a wealthy slave-owning Cuban supportive of Spanish rule, regarding his discovered "disillusionment ... [that would] help me reform my conduct ... and go back over to your faction".

On the other hand, Heredia also refused pardon offers from the Spanish government that his well-connected relatives had been negotiating, which would have implied recognising the correctness of the government's actions against him. And, in a letter to his mother on 11 December 1824, Heredia tells her, "I have almost regretted not being among the prisoners so as to be able to raise my voice in [their] defense..."

In 1836, as Luciani reports in his introduction, Heredia wrote to the Captain General of Cuba for permission to visit his family, renouncing his past views:

It is true that twelve years ago, the independence of Cuba was the most fervent of my vows, and that in order to achieve it I would have sacrificed happily my life's blood. But the calamities and misfortunes that I have witnessed for the past eight years [living in independent yet turbulent Mexico] have greatly modified my opinions, and today I would regard as criminal any attempt to transplant to fortunate and opulent Cuba the ills that afflict the American continent. (p. 12)

During his two months' visit to Cuba, friends and once-fellow revolutionaries shunned him.

Luciani's judgement on Heredia seems right. The "real" Heredia was complex and contradictory, and of course no less a good poet for that. Heredia prefigures all those facing "the impossible choices imposed by exile itself" (p. 13). As both a Janus-faced and anguished ambivalent exile, Heredia raved about much in the United States, even if not about his coping with a miserable climate and a horrid language, and he pledged to die for Cuba, while choosing not to, tempered by his lived experience and disillusionment with Mexico's revolutionary outcome, which he knew best.

Heredia's poem, "A Emilia", most likely a pseudonym for the woman who helped him flee Cuba, summarises best several themes in Heredia's writings – love of a woman, love of family, frustration with English, repudiation of tyranny, lament regarding slavery and his idolatry for Cuba:

Mi oído  
 En lugar de tu acento regalado,  
 o del eco apacible y cariñoso  
 de mi madre, mi hermana y mis amigas,  
 tan sólo escucha de extranjero idioma  
 los bárbaros sonidos; pero al menos  
 no lo fatiga del tirano infame  
 el clamor insolente, ni el gemido  
 del esclavo infeliz, ni del azote  
 el crujir execrable, que emponzoñan  
 la atmósfera de Cuba. ¡Patria mía,  
 idolatrada patria!