Plácido "in B Minor": Notes on a *coloratura* poet

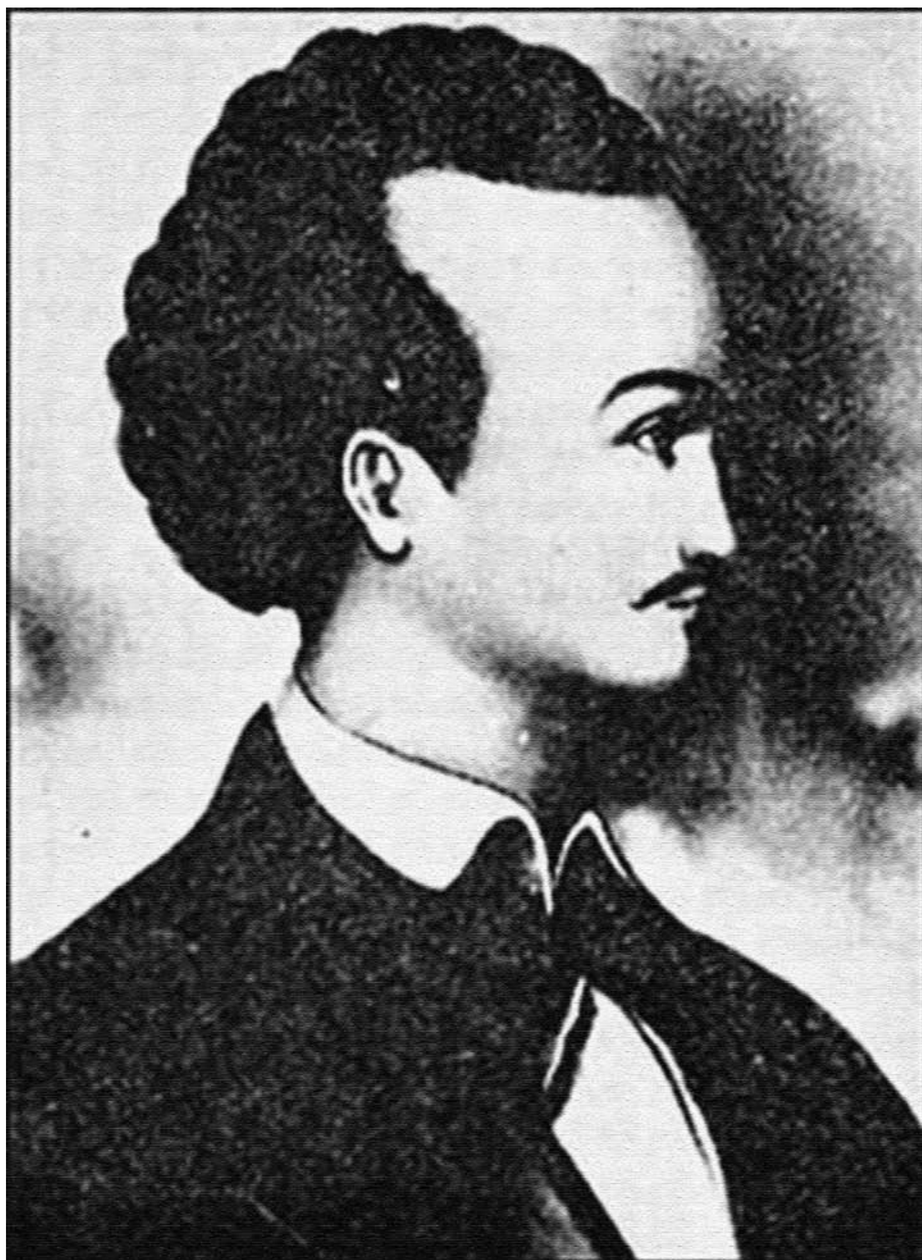
Dr. Francisco Morán
Assistant Professor
Southern Methodist University. Dallas, Texas

I. Hay baile, vamos a ver… [There's a dance, let's see…]

In chapter seventeen of the novel *Cecilia Valdés*, the author Cirilo Villaverde describes a "colored people's" dance to which some of 1830 Havana society's most well-known personalities flock:

"The elegant and well-raised musician Brindis [de Salas]…; Vargas and Dodge, both from Matanzas, the former a barber, the latter a carpenter, who were mixed up in the alleged colored people's conspiracy of 1844 and shot to death at the Paseo de Versailles, in the same city; José de la Concepción Valdés, alias Plácido, the greatest poet Cuba has ever seen, whose disastrous fate was just like that of the two preceding fellows; the distinguished violinist and composer of well-known contradanzas Tomás Vuelta y Flores, who died in the La Escalera uprising that same year, after having been tortured by his judges to wrench a confession from him about a crime whose existence has never been sufficiently proven; the wonderful tailor Francisco de Paula Uribe, himself, who upon not sharing the same fate as Vuelta y Flores took his own life with a barber's razor precisely when he was being locked up in one the Cabaña fortress's cells; the gentle poet Juan Francisco Manzano, who had just been given his freedom thanks to the philanthropy of a few Havana literati; the tailor and talented clarinet player José Dolores Pimienta, whose countenance was as pleasant as his manner was modest and proper."[1]

Villaverde's presentation is of a singular nature. The lives of Brindis de Salas, Plácido, and Manzano –to mention only three emblematic figures– fluctuate, flicker like the flames of the candles that light the dance, in a register that is somewhere between "reality," biography, and the lettered (or spelled ou) or theatrical existence of the character's mask. All these representations become confused: they mislay each other's pages, they quote one another, and connect and disconnect from each other in literature's mirrored chamber. Right in the midst of the dance, of the de rigeur gestures and niceties, while people are animatedly conversing without a care, Villaverde forces us to hear, to see the execution, the suicide, the torture. Mention is



made of the talents the tailor, the contradance composer, and the poet possess, but all this is put in counterpoint with the coming firing squad's discharge, the bloodshed spilling, with each toast, into the wine glasses, in the mirrors that reflected the place's chaos on account of the presence of "colored people."The dance, which had been designated as "formal or courtly," in a macabre and ironic foreshadowing of the executions at La Escalera in the "Paseo de Versalles."[2] At the same time, the narrator suggests that the

dangerous skills those "people of color" were appropriating are what led to their ascent, that is, to La Escalera uprising, to just one more of those so many monstrous acts committed by the colonial Spanish government in Cuba.

II. A "poet in B minor"?

The dance scene Villaverde describes allows one to reflect upon what is, no doubt, the even greater problem: the transgressive crossing of social, political and cultural borders. It is no coincidence that the individualization of the "people of color" at the party occurs with those subjects who have already transgressed the limits under which they had been placed –for reasons of race. Villaverde calls Brindis "elegant and well-raised," Plácido "the greatest poet Cuba [had] ever seen, and Vuelta y Flores the "distinguished violinist and composer of well-known contradanzas" [emphasis mine]. In all these instances, he is talking about blacks who have one foot –if not both– one might say, in the white world. But it is the dance, itself, that best symbolizes these dangerous cultural interventions.

One should not forget that if there is any one cultural display that by its very nature is subject to influences and hybridity it is music and dance.[3] Villaverde specifically mentions the danza, the minuet and the contradanza. So, Cecilia dances a danza with Vargas, a "courtly minuet with Brindis, another with Dodge," and "spoke of contradanzas with Vuelta y Flores."[4] Thus, these musical pieces also reflect the processes of hybridization that were occurring in Cuban society during the first half of the nineteenth century. The book *Historia de la literatura cubana* [History of Cuban Literature], published in 2002, confirms that from 1820-1844 "blacks and mulattos were actually the majority of the professional music sector, although "they [made] white music"—music that was stripped of any pure African roots—to which they, nonetheless, contributed their particular sense of rhythm."[5] Said contribution suggests a sort of intervention, precisely the impossibility of any stripping, which is characteristic of criollo cultures, as in the case of the so-called "New World Baroque," which is significant [my emphasis]. According to the aforementioned book's editors, both Heredia and Plácido "greatly inspired romanzas (songs), mentioning "La lágrima de piedad," first, and then "La Atala."

Plácido's footsteps through the cultural (musical, literary) milieu are marked by a mulattoness that was –as we know– inscribed upon his skin. The oscillations of Plácido's writing, going back and forth –as he did– from popular poetry to a late neoclassicism and romanticism, could also be seen in the critical reception to his work. The adjective that might best describe him will forever mark the thickness of his mask and pose: almost. It is just that this almost became trapped in the spider web of incipient Cuban nationalism: "Almost white, his skin color would not have been the insurmountable obstacle outside of Cuba that it was here" [my emphasis].[6] Many thought of him as almost ordinary –sometimes even disparagingly considering him a "coplero" [a two-bit poet]– and almost refined, in his best known works, not just for their similarity to classics, as is the case with "Jicoténcal," but also –in my opinion– because in them his writing was more Europeanized and whitened. Similarly, the no doubt daring political comments he makes in those texts in which he praises the colonial authorities serve to both celebrate and denigrate him as someone "patriotic" and "servile." One can see an example of this

ambiguity in the words of José Salas y Quiroga, who characterizes him as "a genius of a man through whose veins runs mixed European and African blood, a comb maker from Matanzas, a being humbled by the sin of his color." Yet, Salas y Quiroga goes on to say: "in his semi-savage verses [Plácido's work] has the most sublime and generous impulses, one can see sparks," so much so that in his opinion there is no other American poet –not even Heredia– who comes close to him in his "genius, inspiration, nobility and dignity."[7] This comment highlights a dichotomy –brought with the Conquest– in the very same writing and has played an extremely important role in the discourse of what "American" represents: civilization vs. barbarism. The reference to "semi-savage" songs suggest what Salas y Quiroga calls "the sin of color," and symbolizes barbarism, while the "civilized" is represented by a nobility and dignity reserved only for white men. It is precisely because of this that Plácido and Manzano –the mulatto and the black man, respectively– emerge as exceptions in these readings, which do not fail to demonstrate, perhaps subconsciously, the critic's uncomfortable position. Yet, even as notable exceptions, the racist criteria [applied to them] hardly diminish. They are actually consolidated.

Urbano Martínez, author of an excellent biography on Domingo del Monte, clearly states that even if the members of the del Monte group contributed to Manzano's liberation, thus expressing a progressive attitude, "they had clearly not freed themselves from their period's reigning principles," that is, "negrofobia" [fear of blacks]. "They rejected slavery," Martínez comments, "because they considered it a vice that filthily contaminated the descendants of Europeans; an ill that sickened their civilization via contact with an inferior culture with despicable customs."[8] The interest with which Domingo del Monte and the members of his group approach Plácido and Manzano was, in my opinion (and not denying their humanitarian and progressive position), mediated by two undeniable factors. The tradition of literate writing in which both poets participate, and the fact that they could write as Europeans –despite greater or lesser "imperfections"– made both of them less black, if you will. Their racial otherness seemed to become somewhat diluted as they assumed white culture. That is why I earlier mentioned the truly exceptional characteristics that some members of the criollo elite saw in the mulatto "comb maker" artisan, on the one hand, and the black slave, on the other. The other factor is that this also provided the del Monte group members with an argument for the elimination of the slave trade and slavery, from a humanistic point of view. But any recognition of that humanity was strongly conditioned by class interests. In this particular case one should recall that in 1837 even del Monte tells José Jacinto Milanés: "today we Cubans are nothing more than a grafting of Spanish and Mandinga, that is, of the last two links of the human race, as far as civilization and morality are concerned."[9] The collection that was taken up by the del Monte group to buy Manzano's freedom was not simply an absolutely humanitarian or even anti-racist gesture. Manzano was part of the Mandinga graft, of the alleged strangeness that stood in the way of the formation of a white nation. When on May1, 1843, Domingo del Monte realized he and his family had to hurriedly set sail for the United States, on account of rumors circulating that linked him to abolitionism and to a slave rebellion that was in the planning, his departure from Cuba gave rise to new doubts and

to "calumny."[10] In a letter addressed to a U.S. friend, Alexander H. Everett, he refutes such accusations and reiterates that if he had stood against the slave trade and fought for its end this was not because he was an abolitionist but rather "because, [just] like Mr. Luz and Mr. Saco, and any thinking being on the Island of Cuba…, he did not want to see her turned into a republic of Africans but rather a nation of civilized whites."[11] If what Fina García Marruz says is true –and I am in agreement with her–, that "[del Monte's] positions [were] strategic and never finite," this is how we, too, should see his 'anti-slavery stance'"[12]

Given what we have seen up till now, it is obvious that the critical reception to Plácido was inevitably conditioned by both aesthetic and racial considerations. In Lo cubano en la poesía, by Cintio Vitier, accustomed, as he was, to nuptial between poets, devotes his "third lesson" to Heredia and Plácido. It almost goes without saying that the lesson focuses primarily on Heredia, of whom Vitier writes: "[he] is our first worthy poet…, the nation's first bard, the first person who through poetry saw the nation as something needed by the soul."[13] But we already know that for Vitier nuptials go hand in hand with divorces, and ruptures. As he, himself, said: "If Heredia's voice is haughty and passionate, Plácido's is the humblest [voice] our poetry has ever had."[14] Yet, this is not all: it is the case that Plácido doesn't have his "own song [voice]" because his "is made up of other voices," despite the fact "it was impossible for it to be taken for anyone else's." This includes those poems of his that are considered his best –"A una ingrata," "La muerte de Gessler," "Jicontécal"– and even "his entire uneven production." Plácido's poetry, unlike Heredia's –in which one could anticipate Martí– "does not enter into our attempt to distinguish –through the historical process– what was 'Cuban.' Its extremely personal nature makes it sterile," says Vitier. "It is born and dies with him; it does not go on or announce anything; it is not part of the historical future."[15] Vitier's alienating of "Cubanness" in Plácido's poetry –intentional or not-, contributes or lends itself to the whitening and compulsive heterosexuality upon which the Cuban canon has been constructed.[16] Plácido's "sterility," his de-nationalization—the result of a teleological reading of "Cubanness," is particularly ironic if we read the title of the third lesson in Vitier's book: "The interiorization of nature; landscape, nation, soul. The Cubanness of Plácido." Deceptively, the title makes the reader think that what the lesson is trying to do is confirm the Cubanness of the Mantancero poet: but the result is the opposite. Yes; there is Cubanness, but it consists of "no announcing or continuing anything" in that "same absence of any sense of history."[17]

We ask ourselves how this is possible, if Vitier is looking for poetry that "is a faithful reflection of the country's integration in the nineteenth century and of the integration in the Republic, later," which he insists "is illuminating the nation."[18] This "absence of a sense of history" could actually be an indicator of precisely that cubanidad. The critical sterilization of Plácido goes beyond just aesthetic reasons. After all, there are other examples reminiscent of the canon's whims: here is an example. Bonifacio Byrne wrote one of Cuban modernism's most important titles: *Excéntricas* (1893), a book that has never been reprinted, due to its very few poems. Nevertheless, what has made him famous and, to some extent, part of the Cuban canon, is a terrible patriotic poem: "Mi bandera." This is a good example of extra-literary values surpassing –or even pushing aside– aesthetic ones, as regards the appreciation of a poet.

In effect, Plácido is a "minor poet." But his production is "uneven," as Vitier asserted –and we even agree with him– but no more uneven than Heredia's, a poet to whose work we would unlikely return for simple reading pleasure, and who we might read as an "object of study, of research." To my knowledge, there is a study out there that has not yet been done, and which I believe would be fruitful. There is no doubt that Vitier has most efficiently discussed the canon of Cuban poetry. I would like to suggest (or just believe) that a reading of *Lo cubano en la poesía* from a racial point of view might explain Plácido's disqualification independently from his literary value, and situate him in a gaze that seeks to homogenize "Cubanness" while sacrificing differences. Thus, what seems to concern Vitier about Guillén's work is the agency of negritude in it. That is why he criticized him for not preserving that "beautiful balance" between the whiteness and blackness of "La balada de los dos abuelos" [The Ballad of the Two Grandfathers]. For Vitier, in the sonnet "El abuelo" [The Grandfather] we step beyond that reconciliation and affirm difference. Of the sonnet he states: "[It] is about only one of them, the black grandfather" [original emphasis]. He goes on to say of the poem "El apellido" [The Surname], that Guillén "violently decides in favor of the black grandfather."[19] It is important to note the sense of horror associated with the violence attributed to the affirmation of an other identity. In facing this "aberration," Vitier employs his criticism like an orthopedic device: "But no, his name does not exist in Mandinga, nor in Congo, nor in Dahomeyan. His name is also not air. His name is Nicolas Guillen, for the grace and glory of our Cuban poetry" (original emphasis).[20] 'Cuban' is the robust identity in which all differences are resolved, in opposition of any affirmation of negritude. This is particularly true of that identity that has been a persistent phantom since the beginning of the nationalist movement: that of blacks. For Vitier, Guillén's work paves the way for the "very Cuban, and not African, son."[21] In that fade-out—in which Africa is erased—Plácido disappears, shot to death once again.

Notes and Bibliography

1- Villaverde, Cirilo. *Cecilia Valdés*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1992. 381 – 82.
2- Villaverde, Cirilo. Op. cit.: 377.
3- An example of this, about the Spanish dancer, can be found in Martí's well-known *Versos sencillos*. As the reader no doubt recalls, to gain access to—pass into, enter—the space of representation, the lyric subject must first overcome the first obstacle that impedes its entrance: the Spanish flag. Once that is eliminated (we highlight its elimination because Martí's first person refuses to ignore it: "Because if the flag is there,/I don't know, I can't go in"—another, more difficult to deny border appears: the the dancer is Spanish. Martí's first person tries to resolve the dilemma by simply denying it: "What do you mean she's Galician?/Well, they're wrong: is she divine?" See *José Martí. Obra poética*. Miami: La Moderna Poesía, 1983. 125 – 27. First, Martí transforms the dancer's national origen not by establishing a fact, something that can be corroborated, but rather via a rumor: they say. In the second place, he replaces the specificity of her origen—Galician—with a quality that is not marked by an identity: divine: Nevertheless, and despite these machinations, from the very first stanzas Martí invites us to see the Spanish dancer. More over, in his effort to allow us the dance he, himself, disappears so that the dancer dancing a Spanish dance can appear in his place. What is curious about this situation is that upon recreating the dance and the actual dancer, the writing seeks to capture us, it allows itself to wonder at them both and, finally, ends up cross dressing as the three things: as the dance, in Spanishness and as a dancer. This shows the challenges cultural products like music and food represent for those identities that have powerful and full dreams (remember Fernando Ortiz's concept of the *ajiaco*).
4- Villaverde, Cirilo. Op. Cit: 382.
5- Arcos, Jorge *et al*. (2002): *Historia de la literatura cubana*. La Habana: Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística. 101.
6- Arcos, *et al*. Op. cit:101.
7- Arcos, *et al*. Op. cit: 158.
8- Salas y Quiroga, Jacinto. (1964): *Viajes*. La Habana: Editora del Consejo Nacional de Cultura, 126-127.
9- Martínez, Urbano. (1997): *Domingo del Monte y su tiempo*. La Habana: Ediciones Unión, 336.
10- Martínez, Urbano. Op. cit.: 347.
11- Martínez, Urbano. Op. cit.: 337.
12- Martínez, Urbano. Op. cit.: 348.
13- García Marruz alludes to this "typical, indirect way [with which] he decides the freedom of poet Juan Francisco Manzano and the publication of his poetry abroad, when he gave the necessary materials to Richard A. Madden for his book in favor of the abolition of slavery." In light of what she, herself, confirms—and what we've heard del Monte, himself, 'say—one cannot help but conclude that these positions were strategic and in no way final. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that García Marruz's reading does nothing more than reinforce the image of Manzano as a victim who shows himself to be "timid and shy" in front of his white benefactor, the same way he would be at the hands of his white owner. See Fina García Marruz. (1986): "Del Monte y Manzano," in *Hablar de poesía*. La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 326-56.
14- Vitier, Cintio. (1998): *Lo cubano en la poesía*. La Habana: Letras Cubanas. 65.
15- Vitier, Cintio. Op. cit.:77.
16- Vitier, Cintio. Op. cit.: 78.
17- To prove this, one would only have to consider the precarious position women writers have been assigned in the canon—women like Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Juana Borrero, for example—or those poets who are suspected or confirmed of having deviated from the heterosexual norm: Julián de Casal, José Manuel Poveda, Emilia Ballagas, Virgilio Piñera, Reinaldo Arenas. I should clarify that I am not saying here that they are not accepted as important figures in the nation's literature but rather that the space they occupy, whichever it is, is always subject to debate—unlike with Heredia or Martí. These writers are either denied or doubted in a specific literary genre—as is the case with la Avellaneda and poetry and the novel, and Piñera with poetry. They are denied their Cubanness for one reason or another.
18- Vitier, Cintio. Op. cit.:81.
19- Vitier, Cintio. Op. cit.:28-29.
20- Vitier, Cintio. Op. cit.:301
21- Vitier, Cintio. Op. cit.:302.
22- Vitier, Cintio. Op. cit.: 302