

**CIRILO VILLAVERDE AND REALISM:
THE THEME OF SLAVERY IN CECILIA VALDES**

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The main plot of *Cecilia Valdés* is typical of the Romantic novel, and might seem almost trivial were it not for the social implications of racial discrimination, which had already risen to the surface in the Cuba of 1831, the year in which the major part of the action takes place. Don Cándido Gamboa, a successful businessman of Havana, has, in his youth, seduced Rosario Alarcón by whom he has an illegitimate daughter. The daughter is placed in the Casa Cuna, founded in 1711 by Bishop Gerónimo Valdés, and thereby receives the name of the founder, while her mother is driven insane at the separation and is removed to the hospital of Santa Paula. The child, Cecilia Valdés, is later taken home by her grandmother, Josefa Alarcón, and the story really begins in 1831 when Cecilia has fallen in love with Leonardo Gamboa, the legitimate son of Don Cándido, neither of them realizing that he is her half-brother. Cecilia believes that Leonardo is genuinely in love with her, and she cannot reconcile herself to the fact that the slight amount of negro blood which she has inherited from her mother will be sufficient to prevent him from marrying her. When her lover does finally abandon her in favor of the well-born Isabel Ilincheta, Cecilia inspires her mulatto admirer, José Dolores Pimienta, to kill Leonardo on the steps of the church where he is about to be married.

The major defect of the novel is the way in which Villaverde loses his grip of the main plot. The novel, in four parts, begins with a brilliant description of a *baile de cuna*, a dance at which the mulatto class predominated, but which was open to people of all classes and was frequently attended by the young men of well to do white families. This gives Villaverde a chance to set the scene and to discuss Cecilia's attraction towards Leonardo and her less favorable attitude towards José Dolores, the leader of the orchestra. The principal characters remain on the center of the stage throughout Part One, even where they are occasionally used merely to present scenes of *costumbrista* interest, as in Chapter IX when Leonardo is seen as a student at the University of Havana, or in Chapter XII, where he persuades his over-indulgent mother, Doña Rosa, to buy him the latest thing in repeating watches, newly imported from Geneva.

Part Two is dedicated largely to the details of Don Cándido's attempts to keep the lovers apart and to the revelation that he is the father of Cecilia Valdés, which the reader has almost certainly guessed already. In this part of the book, however, there are several episodes which have no direct connection with the plot, such as that in Chapter VI which exposes Don Cándido as a slave trader. And the whole of Part Three is devoted to a description of life on the plantations of the Ilincheta and Gamboa families in the province of Pinar del Río. In Part Three Villaverde

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finds an opportunity to portray all the horrors of slavery in Cuba at the time. Here he introduces a subplot which extends into Part Four and acquires growing importance as the novel advances, leaving the author less space to return to his main plot and weakening the structure of the book.¹ One editor of *Cecilia Valdés* has pointed out several structural deficiencies in this part of the work including, for instance, the failure to account for the death of Cecilia's grandmother.²

It was doubtless the hollowness of the mystery in Part Two and the structural defects of the latter part of the work which led one important critic to label it as "una novela folletinesca de burda trama," and to exclaim: "¿Arte realista? Así lo declaró el autor, jactanciosamente. Más bien podría decirse que, fracasada la novela como arte, lo que interesa al lector es la realidad cruda que quedó sin expresión novelesca. Páginas costumbristas sueltas, no la novela de la mulata Cecilia Valdés, es lo que llama la atención."³ Subsequent historians of the Spanish-American novel have tempered this judgment considerably, but they tend to accept the fragmentary nature of the work.⁴ All these judgments, however, tend to leave out of account the value of the subplot which, taken by itself, is both realistic and well presented as a story.

This subplot involves principally the slave María de la Regla who is introduced fleetingly right at the beginning of the novel, and is presented in Part Two as the nurse of Doña Rosa's youngest daughter, Adela. María de Regla is exiled to the estate of *La Tinaja* for the crime of allowing her own daughter an equal share of her abundant milk while nursing Adela as a baby. We meet her again in Part Three; she is eventually pardoned by Doña Rosa and allowed to return to Havana to join her rightful common law husband, Dionisio Jaruco. But Dionisio, because of his passion for women, has meanwhile been trying to force his attentions on Cecilia Valdés, who looks down on him with all the scorn of the mulatta for the black. Dionisio provokes a fight with José Dolores, from which he himself comes off badly, and he has to hide out with a disreputable freed slave. Finally, at the end of his tether, he murders the famous captain of police, Tondá, who has come in search of him. Thus María's own search for her errant husband is frustrated, and her fate, alone with only her own resources in the city of Havana at the end of the novel, is almost as tragic as that of the heroine.

1. A. M. Eligio de la Puente, in his introduction to Cirilo Villaverde, *Dos amores* (Habana: Cultural S.A., 1930), p.xxix, remarks on the weak ending to Villaverde's earlier novels: "Debe señalársele, sin embargo, el defecto común a todas estas creaciones de Villaverde: El violento final, que sobreviene casi siempre de improviso, como precipitando los acontecimientos, para salir pronto del empeño."

2. Esteban Rodríguez Herrera, ed., Cirilo Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Angel* (Habana: Editorial Lex, 1953), p. 691, fn.

3. Enrique Anderson Imbert, *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana*, 4ta. ed. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1962), I, 247-48.

4. Raimundo Lazo, *Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana, El siglo XIX (1780-1914)* México: Porrúa, 1967), pp. 274-75; Orlando Gómez Gil, *Historia crítica de la literatura hispanoamericana* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), pp. 333-35.

It is in dealing with this subplot and with the theme of slavery in general, that Villaverde especially manifests his realism. In his own prologue to the novel he states it quite explicitly: "Harto se me alcanza que los extraños, dígase, las personas que no conozcan de cerca las costumbres ni la época de la historia de Cuba que he querido pintar, tal vez crean que escogí los colores más oscuros y sobrecargué de sombras el cuadro por el mero placer de causar efecto a la Rembrandt, o a la Gustavo Doré. Nada más distante de mi mente. Me precio de ser, antes que otra cosa, escritor realista, tomando esta palabra en el sentido artístico que se le da modernamente."⁵ He goes on to mention his debt to Scott and Manzoni and to say that he has not read any novel in the thirty years before the writing of this note, that is, up to 1879. But Villaverde's realism goes at times beyond the romantic and picturesque realism of Scott and Manzoni. It is known that the enthusiasm of Cuban literary circles for Balzac was already awakened in the late 1830s when Villaverde was preparing his first version of the novel, and perhaps *Cecilia Valdés* owes more to the French author than to those whom the author singles out for mention.⁶ Critics have also noticed that the starkness of Villaverde's realism owes something to the classical Spanish tradition.⁷

Apart from its somber tones the realism of Villaverde is derived from direct observation, and here also a parallel with Balzac suggests itself.⁸ As the author himself claims:

Lejos de inventar o de fingir caracteres y escenas fantasiosas e inverosímiles, he llevado al realismo, según entiendo, hasta el punto de presentar los principales personajes de la novela con todos sus pelos y señales, como vulgarmente se dice, vestidos con el traje que llevaron en vida, la mayor parte bajo su nombre y apellido verdaderos, hablando el mismo lenguaje que usaron en las escenas históricas en que figuraron, copiando en lo que cabía, *d'apres nature*, su fisonomía física y moral, a fin de que aquéllos que los conocieron de vista o por tradición, los reconozcan sin dificultad y digan cuando menos: el parecido es innegable.⁹

This attention to verisimilitude is apparent not only in the treatment of the principal characters but also of the minor ones, many of whom were also drawn from life.

5. Cirilo Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Angel* (Habana: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, 1964), p. 16. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. I have given section and chapter in order to facilitate reference to other editions.

6. José Z. González del Valle, *La vida literaria de Cuba, 1836-1840* (Habana: Dirección de Cultura, 1938), p.68.

7. Rafael Fernández Villa-Urrutia, "Para una lectura de Cecilia Valdés," *Revista Cubana*, 31 (1957): 31-32; and Salvador Bueno, *Historia de la literatura cubana* (Habana: Editora del Ministerio de Educación, 1963), p. 178.

8. Rodríguez Herrera, Introduction to *Cecilia Valdés*, p. xxv.

9. Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés*, p. 17.

The scene in which Maria de Regla is first mentioned at length, and which deals with her separation from Dionisio and her daughter and her exile to *La Tinaja* for an apparently trivial offense (*Cecilia*, II, ix, 279-85), has many parallels in the fiction of the times. It forms, in a slightly different guise, the basis of the main plot of the novel *Francisco* by Anselmo Suárez y Romero, and of the later version of the same story: *El negro Francisco* by Antonio Zambrana.¹⁰ In another of Villaverde's novels, *La joven de la flecha de oro*, actually published in its entirety in Cuba in 1841, the slave girl Anacleta is banished to an estate for the petty crime of having spent the night out without permission, although it is true that she is suspected of having favored her young mistress's love affair.¹¹ She is put to work in the fields and in the estate house on the roughest chores, she is forced to exchange her decent city clothes for rough drill and she has her hair cut short, which was considered a great indignity.¹² In the same author's *El penitente* the slave Maguana dies as a consequence of the maltreatment handed out to her for a similar offense.¹³

In all these novels the thoughtless cruelty of the female slave owners is depicted in such extreme terms as to appear almost unbelievable. But in fact the use of banishment to the estate was not uncommon: it was rather the rule in cases such as that of María de Regla. A contemporary observer, Madame de Merlin, tells us:

Les nègres et négresses destinés au service interieur de la maison peuvent employer leur temps libre à d'autres ouvrages pour leur propre compte; ils profiteraient davantage de cette faveur s'ils étaient moins paresseux et moins vicieux. Leur désœuvrement habituel, l'ardeur du sang africain, et cette insouciance qui résulte de l'absence de responsabilité de son propre sort, engendrent chez eux les moeurs et les habitudes les plus déréglées. Ils se marient rarement: à quoi bon? Le mari et la femme peuvent être vendus, d'un jour à l'autre, a des maîtres différents, et leur séparation devient alors éternelle. Leurs enfants ne leur appartiennent pas. Le bonheur domestique, ainsi que la communauté des intérêts, leur étant interdit, les liens de la nature se bornent chez eux à l'instinct d'une sensualité violente et désordonnée. Une pauvre fille devient-elle grosse, le maître, s'il a des scrupules, en est quitté pour infliger, au nom de la morale, une punition à la délinquante et pour garder le négillon chez lui. Presque toujours la mère seule est châtiée. La peine à laquelle elle est ordinairement condamnée,

10. The first was written in 1839 and published in 1880; the second was begun in the 1860s and published in 1873. For a general account of the novel of slavery see G. R. Coulthard, *Race and Colour in Caribbean literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

11. Cirilo Villaverde, *La joven de la flecha de oro* (Habana: Consejo Nacional Cubano de la UNESCO, 1962), p. 335.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 356-57.

13. Cirilo Villaverde, *El penitente, novela de costumbres cubanas* (Habana: La Burgalesa, 1925), p. 80.

et qui lui est le plus sensible, c'est l'exil à la sucrerie pendant des mois, et, en cas de récidive, pendant des années. On commence par faire avouer à la coupable sa faute à genoux, et, après qu'elle a demandé pardon à Dieu et à son maître, on lui rase la tête et on la dépouille de ses vêtements de ville, qui sont aussitôt remplacés par une chemise de grosse toile et un jupon de *listado*. Montée sur une mule, elle est expédiée avec le *requa* qui apporte les provisions de la semaine à la sucrerie. Là, bien que munie d'une recommandation charitable de la *señora* pour le *mayoral*, elle est soumise aux travaux de l'habitation. Cette punition ne corrige ni la coupable ni ses compagnes, bien moins encore les complices, et la race continue à croître et à multiplier comme il plaît à Dieu.¹⁴

The unkindest cut in all this was the slave owner's hypocritical outrage at the "immorality" of the slave girl, when it was he himself by his rendering marriage so insecure who was responsible for so many illicit unions. The *real cédula* of May 31, 1789, which was in force during the 1830s and 1840s, made quite explicit provision for the promotion of legal marriage among the slaves of Cuba. Where two slaves of different estates were to be married, the woman should go to live with the man, and the owner of the man should agree to buy her at an equitable price. Where a price could not be agreed the matter should be submitted to arbitration. If the owner of the man refused to buy the woman, then the owner of the woman had the right to buy the man. If neither owner would buy, then the couple were to be put up for sale to a third party.¹⁵ This arrangement was far more humane than that provided for by either the English or the French law relating to slaves. But the fact that it was ignored by the planters is obvious from the statement of Madame de Merlin.

It is to her separation from Dionisio that María de Regla attributes his later inconstancy: "¿Por qué Dionisio parece que no me quiere y que me ha olvidado? Por nuestra separación. A mi lado él no hubiera cometido esa locura. Siempre fue tierno y fiel esposo conmigo. ¡Tan querendón...! Yo fui cariñosísima esposa para con él. Mientras vivimos juntos, mientras pudimos decir que éramos casados, no tuvimos un sí ni un no" (*Cecilia*, III, viii, 501-02). María's case differs from the common run in that she was originally married to Dionisio; but from the time of her separation her story 'was the same as that of the unfortunate unmarried mother. The

14. Madame la Comtesse Merlin, *La Havane* (Bruxelles: Societé Typographique Belge, 1844), II, 153-54. Madame de Merlin was a lady of Cuban birth who returned to her native land in 1840 for a short visit. She wrote letters to her friends in Europe which betray very much the attitude of the group which formed around Domingo Delmonte, in whose circle Villaverde also figured although he was more radical in his thinking than Delmonte. Madame de Merlin advocated the abolition of the trade but the retention of slavery: "Rien de plus juste que l'abolition de la traite des noirs; rien de plus injuste que l'émancipation des esclaves. Si la traite est un abus révoltant de la force, un attentat contre le droit naturel, l'émancipation serait une violation de la propriété, des droits acquis et consacré par les lois, une vraie spoliation. Que gouvernement assez riche indemniserait tant de propriétaires qui seraient dépouillés d'un bien légitimement acquis?"

15. José Antonio Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el nuevo mundo y en especial en los países américo-hispanos* (Habana: Cultural S. A., 1938), III, 12.

situation was rendered worse by the fact that María, a good-looking and healthy woman in her early twenties when first sent to the sugar estate, was pursued by every man in sight: "He sido solicitada por cuantos han llevado calzones en este infernal ingenio" (*Cecilia*, III, viii, 503). The captain of the ship which brought her from the port of Havana, the driver who brought her up from the ship, the *mayoral*, the roof mender, the sugar factory overseer, the *mayordomo* in charge of the estate house, even the estate doctor made advances to her. At last she fell to the estate carpenter, and had a son by him, who incidentally disdains his mother since he has white blood from the Basque father.

This graphic description of the lust with which María is sought by the men of the district is borne out by contemporary sources. The estate owners had always been reluctant to introduce women onto the sugar plantations for a variety of reasons:

Grande había sido desde épocas anteriores la resistencia de los hacendados para introducir negras esclavas en sus ingenios, y esto provenía de tres causas: la primera, la facilidad con que se sacaban esclavos de las costas africanas, y el error de los hacendados en creer que el tráfico nunca habría de sufrir alteraciones, 2a. que los moralistas de aquel tiempo consideraban como escandaloso tener en sus haciendas negros de ambos sexos que no fuesen casados; mientras que, según la expresión de un ilustrado cubano no escrupulizaban en condenar los varones a perpetuo celibato... 3a. y última, consistía en la mayor aptitud de los varones para el trabajo.¹⁶

It is hardly surprising to the modern reader that on the sugar estates, "se ven suicidios, coitos bestiales, fugas continuas, languidez en los semblantes, debilidad en los miembros, muchos enfermos y muertes."¹⁷ Despite a *real cédula* of 1804 there was still a marked reluctance by the owners to change this situation. It is a mark of Villaverde's deliberate attention to realistic detail that he was prepared to deal with such a theme in his novel. Had this episode been dealt with by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda or one of the other fully Romantic exponents of the slavery novel, María de Regla would doubtless have died rather than surrender. Partly because of his general attitude, and partly because he is dealing here with a minor character, Villaverde is very much more down to earth. Referring to María's narration of this part of her life, the recent editor of *Cecilia Valdés* makes an acute observation:

Este es uno de los pasajes más interesantes de la novela...El relato, si bien peca de extenso, no pasa de ser un desahogo conmovedor y sincero de un alma adolorida que sabe aprove-

16. *Ibid.*, III, 51-52.

17. *Ibid.*, IV, 292.

char la única oportunidad que se le ha ofrecido en su vida toda para que exprese en su propio y rudo lenguaje los padecimientos sufridos, al servicio de los Gamboa. Y más conmovería la pintura del relato si el lenguaje puesto por el novelista en boca de la esclava no resultara al final algo enfadoso, un poco desenvuelto y con menos decoro de lo regular, según a sí misma se pinta María de Regla: vanidosa, descocada, algo altanera y presumida, cualidades que la hacen perder buena parte de la estimación a que podía ser acreedora, atrayendo las simpatías que le eran necesarias para librarse del enojo de su implacable ama doña Rosa.¹⁸

We may not view the character of María as this critic does, but there is no doubt that she has a definite personality, and the view that Villaverde's slaves are "victims of a system, with little character or personality of their own," is not altogether justified.¹⁹ In particular we may feel that it is precisely Villaverde's representation of María's speech, colloquial and even racy, although still with the standard idiom, which gives her personality a distinct flavor. María's version of the story can be contrasted with the way in which Doña Rosa tells it in a different part of the novel, in a more stilted but at the same time appropriately gossipy and malicious manner (*Cecilia*, II, ix, 285).

The final irony of María's fate comes with her freedom. After suffering the dreadful *bocabajo* or flogging, and the insults of the *mayoral* and the unpleasant task of working in the infirmary for upwards of twelve years, she is given the chance of reuniting with Dionisio. On the occasion of the visit of the Gamboa family to the estate she sees Adela, the sister of Leonardo, and the child whom she suckled many years before. She pours out the whole story and confesses her part in the scenes surrounding the birth of Cecilia Valdés. Adela intercedes for her with Doña Rosa, and the latter more or less graciously agrees to allow her slave to go back to Havana: "—Está bien, Adela, replicó doña Rosa después de breve rato de reflexión. Por ti y por Isabelita (que no podía reprimir el llanto) perdono a María de Regla. Que vuelva a La Habana, pero no a servirme, ni a vivir en casa, sino para que se alquile por su cuenta. Yo le daré papel. Con eso, el jornal que gane será para que tú y Carmen tengan todos los meses algún dinerito con qué comprar alfileres..." (*Cecilia*, III, ix, 524).

Doña Rosa is referring to a system whereby a slave owner could give a slave a license to seek work outside the home for a salary. But not only was this type of work considered lowering to the dignity of the slave, but the slave had to return the greater part or all of the salary to the owner. María de Regla does not find work in Havana, and finally decides to take up the sale of meat on the invitation of the picturesque Genoveva Santa Cruz, who has a business selling meat around the streets of Havana (*Ceci-*

18. Rodríguez Herrera, in Villaverde, *Cecilia Valdés*, p. 593-94, fn.

19. Coulthard, *Race and Colour*, p. 21.

lia, IV, iii, 565-74). This type of uneasy quasi-freedom existed in Cuba until the end of slavery. Walter Goodman, an English artist who travelled in Cuba between 1864 and 1869, noticed these street sellers on his arrival in Santiago. Among other criers he noticed especially the *dulcera*: "The Dulcera deals in 'dulces,' and her cry of 'Dulce de guayaba! Dulce de almiba!', [sic] proclaims that her tray contains various kinds of West Indian preserves. The Dulcera is also a slave, and consequently derives no pecuniary benefit from the sale of her sweets, unless, by pre-arrangement with her owner, a share in the profits has been allowed."²⁰ To judge from the remarks of Doña Rosa, quoted earlier, María was to surrender all of her earnings. Doña Rosa describes as pin-money what would be for María an important sum. Villaverde does at times exclaim in horror over the cruelties of slavery, but at other times, as here, he drops in a point like this without explanation, which would have been unnecessary to his nineteenth-century readers. To the present-day reader this is more telling than all the commentaries he might make.

Finally María de Regla is brought back into the household as a go-between for Leonardo and Cecilia, whom Don Cándido has had locked away in a house for fallen women in order to prevent any prolongation of the incestuous relationship. Not being fully aware of the incestuous nature of the affair, Doña Rosa actively promotes it as a form of revenge for her husband's unfaithfulness over the years. Whereas María might have been presented as an unwilling accomplice of Doña Rosa and Leonardo, Villaverde adopts a more practical view of her character in this situation: "Prestóse ella de la mejor gana, tanto porque estaba en su índole el papel de conspiradora, cuanto que se prometía pagar con bienes los muchos males recibidos de manos de los dos" (*Cecilia*, IV, vii, 627). María is so successful in her mission that Cecilia is rescued from her imprisonment and installed in a house of her own by Leonardo, with María as her servant, but María unadvisedly tells Doña Rosa the full story of Cecilia's birth, "con el objeto de obtener el completo perdón de sus pecados y alguna ayuda en favor de Dionisio, que seguía en estrecha prisión." (*Cecilia*, IV, vii, 639). Doña Rosa persuades Leonardo to give Cecilia up, and his provokes the final tragedy. At this point we lose sight of María de Regla, and we are left to imagine her ultimate fate.

Parallel to the misfortunes of María runs the story of her husband Dionisio. The character of Dionisio was definitely drawn from life, and as such it fits in with Villaverde's doctrine of realism to present him as he was, without idealizing him although showing him in some measure as the victim of his circumstances. The first scene in which he appears, attempting to evade the violent wrath of Doña Rosa (never content with the manner in which he makes his purchases in the market) shows his resignation to his fate after thirty years of similar hardships (*Cecilia*, II, vi, 236-39). She threatens him with a beating at the *Maestranza de artillería* or the

20. Walter Goodman, *The Pearl of the Antilles or an Artist in Cuba* (London: King and Co., 1873), pp. 37-38.

Vedado, both places for the execution of floggings. There is a description of this type of arrangement, which was intended to avoid the unpleasantness of heavy floggings in the town houses of the gentry, in the book by Goodman, who happened to have been interned for a few days in the dungeons of the Morro castle at Santiago:

My attention is presently arrested by a sound which reminds me of washing, for in Cuba this operation is usually performed by placing the wet linen on a flat board, and belabouring it with a smooth stone or a heavy roller. My companion smiles when I give him my impression of the familiar sounds, and he tells me that white linen is not the object of the beating, but black limbs! An unruly slave receives his castigation at the jail, when it is found inconvenient to perform the operation under his master's roof. No inquiry into the offence is made by the officers of justice; the miscreant is simply ordered twenty-five or fifty lashes, as the case may be, by his accuser, who acts as his jury, judge, and occasionally executioner!²¹

Dionisio is merely threatened with this treatment, and perhaps he was too valuable to be flogged for a trivial reason. We also learn of Dionisio's antecedents with the Conde de Jaruco, in whose household he had picked up the art of reading and writing from which the negro was generally barred.²²

While working for the Conde de Jaruco he had also amassed enough in tips to take advantage of the system of the *coartada*. Visitors to Cuba waxed enthusiastic over the liberality of the Spanish laws in relation to the manumission of slaves. It is curious to notice how they are anxious on the one hand to affirm that the slaves were all perfectly happy in their present situation, and on the other to stress the ease with which they might gain their freedom. Madame de Marlin explains the system rather more fully than Villaverde in his novel:

L'esclave romain ne pouvait rien posséder; tout chez lui appartenait à son maître. A Cuba, para la *real cédula* de 1789, et, ce qui est à remarquer par la coutume antérieure à cette disposition légale, tout ce que l'esclave gagne ou possède lui appartient. Son droit sur sa propriété est aussi sacré devant la loi que

21. Goodman, *The Pearl of the Antilles*, pp. 70-71. See also David Turnbull, *Travels in the West Indies. Cuba; with Notices of Porto Rico and the Slave Trade* (London: Longman, 1840), p. 54. Turnbull, an earlier, but a strongly anti slavery witness, writes: "The mistress of many a great family in the Havana will not scruple to tell you that such is the proneness of her people to vice and idleness, she finds it necessary to send one or more of them once a month to the whipping post, not so much on account of any positive delinquency, as because without these periodical advertisements the whole family would become unmanageable, and the master and mistress would lose their authority."

22. Antonio Arredondo, *El negro en Cuba* (Habana: Alfa, 1939), pp. 47-48.

celui de l'homme libre; et si un maître, abusant de son autorité, essayait de le dépouiller de son bien, le procureur fiscal exigerait la restitution. Mais un droit encore plus précieux, et qui n'existe dans aucun code connu, est accordé aux esclaves de Cuba, c'est celui de *coartación*. Cette loi doit encore son origine aux anciennes moeurs des propriétaires et à leur charité naturelle. Non-seulement l'esclave, aussitôt qu'il possède le prix de sa propre valeur, peut obliger son maître à lui donner la liberté; mais faute de posséder la somme entière, il peut forcer ce dernier à recevoir des à-compte, au moins de cinquante piastres, jusqu'à l'entier affranchissement. Dès la première somme payée par l'esclave, son prix est fixé; on ne peut plus l'augmenter. La loi est toute paternelle; car l'esclave, pouvant se libérer par petites sommes, n'est pas tenter de dépenser son pécule à mesure qu'il le gagne, et, par ce moyen, son maître devient pour ainsi dire le dépositaire de ses épargnes. Et puis, l'esclave ne se décourage pas dans ses modestes chances de gain, devant la perspective d'une trop grande somme à réunir; il croit plus rapproché le but de ses espérances, puisqu'il peut l'atteindre par degrés. Il y a plus (et ceci est un bienfait dû non à la loi, mais au maître, et consacré par la coutume); aussitôt qu'un nègre est *coartado*, il est libre de demeurer hors de la maison du maître, de vivre à son compte et de gagner sa vie comme il l'entend, pourvu qu'il paye un salaire convenu et proportionné au prix de l'esclave en sorte que, du moment où celui-ci a payé les premières cinquante piastres, il acquiert autant d'indépendance qu'en aurait un homme libre, tenu, moyennant arrangement, à payer une dette à un créancier.²³

Although this system did offer a chance to the slave there were problems. The customary rate of hire was ten cents on each hundred dollars of the value of the slave for every working day, and there were about 290 working days in the year, Sundays and Church holidays being considered days of rest; so that a slave valued at \$500 might make about \$145 in a year.²⁴ But he would now have to fend for himself over board and lodging, and he had still to pay a salary to his owner, so that he might have little left to put towards his manumission. In practice much would depend on luck and the cooperation of the owner. Villaverde points out another catch in the system when he relates how Dionisio had paid off

23. Merlin, *La Havane*, pp. 151-52.

24. Alexander Humboldt, *The island of Cuba*, trans. J. Thrasher (New York: 1856). p. 212, fn.

\$300 while in the formerly wealthy household of the Conde de Jaruco, but when the latter's estate was sold up this merely allowed him to be bought for \$500 instead of \$800 by Gamboa, and in the less opulent surroundings of the Gamboa family he was unable to continue to save. Thus he is no longer considered to be *coartado*, and the day that he sleeps out of the house he is considered a runaway, and as such is liable to heavy punishment.²⁵

The tragedy of Dionisio stems from his inability to come to terms with his situation: "De dos graves faltas adolecía Dionisio, graves por su triste condition: era la una su afición al baile propio de los blancos." (*Cecilia*, II, vi, 239). He invades a dance which was mainly for whites and the upper section of the free mulatto class. Villaverde mentions several of the mulattoes distinguished in Cuban history who were supposedly present at the ball: Brindis and Vuelta y Flores the musicians, Tondá the captain of police, Plácido the poet, and Vargas and Dodge, the last three all implicated in the uprising of 1844. Dionisio is at first patronized by one of the assistants of the tailor Uribe, who considers him "un individuo inferior a mí, cocinero y... esclavo," and then finds himself refused by Cecilia Valdés. Cecilia prefers whites, and she is polite with mulattoes, even feeling a certain warmth for José Dolores: "Pero dio amplia rienda a su innato exclusivismo cuando se le presentó el negro de las entradas profundas y la rogó le admitiera como pareja para una danza o un minué. Eso sí, no llevó su negativa hasta el áspero y seco; le dio sus razones para no bailar con él, que tenía comprometida la siguiente pieza, que se sentía muy cansada, etc. El hombre no se dio por satisfecho, antes se mortificó lo que es indecible y se alejó murmurando frases groseras y amenazantes. (*Cecilia*, II, xvii, 366). Villaverde presents the social tragedy of the negro in the most realistic terms, dealing with a theme that was hardly dealt with elsewhere until the twentieth century. We are led to feel the desperation which causes Dionisio, "que no era ningún tonto," to throw himself into a foolish brawl with José Dolores.

This fear of the social rise of the black population of Cuba was ever present in those days. When General Pezuela published a circular in 1853 suggesting that emancipation was inevitable in the long run, and that slave owners ought to adjust to the idea, a conservative commentator wrote:

The excitement among the black population of Cuba, but more particularly in the capital, caused by these publications, and the accompanying measures of the government, was intense. Numbers of negroes promenaded the streets of the city, taking the wall from the whites, for the avowed purpose

25. On the difficulties of the *coartados* and the inefficacy of the system, see R. R. Madden, *Observaciones sobre la esclavitud y comercio de los esclavos [por] P. J. G. Alexander; e informe del Dr. Madden sobre la esclavitud en la isla de Cuba* (Barcelona: Impr. de A. Bergnes y Cía., 1841), pp. 36-40, 46-50. Also, Turnbull, *Travels*, pp. 147-48.

of exhibiting their sense of their expected new civil rights; while others, more bold, sought the promenades and places of public resort, where they asserted their equality of social position, by saluting the ladies, and paying them compliments in impudent and audible commendations of their beauty. The insolence of the slaves carried alarm into the bosom of every family.²⁶

One of the main arguments used by the slave owners against emancipation at this time was the risk of having to accept social equality with the negro.

After losing his fight with José Dolores, Dionisio takes refuge with the former slave Malanga, who helps him in a situation which recalls rather closely the parable of the good Samaritan.²⁷ Malanga has no hesitation in harboring Dionisio, despite the fact that strong penalties were set for those who harbored runaway slaves. Indeed, certain free negroes and mulattoes made almost a profession of harboring runaways, as in the case of the old woman Guamá, an important character in Villaverde's *El penitente*. The character of Malanga gives Villaverde a chance to explore the dialect of the lower classes in Cuba, and to present the type of the freed slave who had failed to find a place in colonial society:

Trazamos ahora aquí con brocha gorda la vera efigie de un *curro* del Manglar, en las afueras de la culta Habana, por aquella época memorable de nuestra historia. No es nuestro original el majo que viste traje andaluz. Es, ni más ni menos, el negro o mulato joven, oriundo del barrio dicho o de otros dos o tres de la misma ciudad, matón perdulario, sin oficio ni beneficio, camorrista por índole y por hábito, ladronzuelo de profesión, que se cría en la calle, que vive de la rapiña, y que desde su nacimiento parece destinado a la penca, al grillete o a una muerte violenta. (*Cecilia*, IV, i, 528-29).

The presentation of Malanga shows Villaverde's *costumbrista* affiliations, and the notation of his speech is more labored than the more genuinely realistic rendering of the speech of María and Dionisio.

Despite the breathing space which he gains with Malanga making boots to earn his keep, Dionisio is eventually recognized by the captain of police, Tondá, and having decided to sell his life dearly, he kills the unfortunate captain at the door of a shop. (*Cecilia*, IV, iii, 574). Villaverde comments on the authenticity of the story, "el hecho es histórico en casi todos sus pormenores," and in the conclusion to the novel he tells us that the case against Dionisio was brought up five years later and that he was

26. J. Thrasher, Introduction in Humboldt, *The Island of Cuba*, pp. 69-70.

27. Abiel Abbot, *Letters written in the Interior of Cuba, between the Mountains of Arana, to the East, and of Cosco to the West, in the months of February, March, April and May, 1828* (Boston: Bowles and Dearborn, 1829), p. 114.

condemned to the chain gang for ten years. Francisco Calcagnò, in his *Diccionario biográfico cubano*, makes the following entry under the name José Herrera:

Negro habanero de gran valor personal; en sus mocedades, luchaba con los tiburones y los mataba a puñaladas; se le llamaba Bonaparte Tondá y fue alférez, después teniente, del batallón de honrados morenos. En la época de Vives, y cuando tantas desazones causaban los turbulentos *curros del manglar*, se le comisionó para perseguir a los malhechores de su clase, siendo después de varias hazañas, asesinado en Puerta de Tierra, Ag. 1º de 1827, por el *curro* Figuras, esclavo prófugo de D. Castellano Morel, contra quien, particularmente, se había encarnizado: en Oct. 6 fue el Figuras apresado y ahorcado: todo esto, según *Crónicas inéditas*, de Cervantes; más según Villaverde, que lo cita en su *Cecilia Valdés*, fue muerto por Dionisio Santa Cruz, esclavo prófugo, 1830.²⁸

The suggestion that Villaverde might have been more accurate than Cervantes in his memoirs corroborates the fidelity of his narrative to the historical events.

Thus the documentary realism of Villaverde is particularly attested in his treatment of the subplot. In much of the novel the use which Villaverde makes of his documentary material is merely picturesque:

La obra es un retrato de la vida cubana de mediados del siglo XIX. Le sirve de inspiración y motivos su mismo telón de fondo: el hecho *político* de la colonia, y el hecho *social* de la esclavitud. Entre estos dos polos se fecunda la acción: a su contacto brotan las figuras en procesión maravillosa—esclavos, caleseros, criollos guapos y calaveras, capitanes y hacendados, remilgosas hijas de familia, mulatas de belleza picante y sensual... Cada personaje es fiel a la parte que el cuadro histórico le asigna, y nada más. Es el paisaje y no las personas, lo que se ofrece al interés del lector. Una época al desnudo lo que queda en su retina. Lo cual fue la cabal aspiración de Cirilo Villaverde.²⁹

In telling the story of María de Regla and Dionisio, however, he goes beyond the picturesque and beyond a typified demonstration of the abuses of the slave system in Cuba. In dealing with this theme his realism

28. Francisco Calcagnò, *Diccionario Biográfico Cubano* (New York: Impr. N. Ponce de León, 1878), p. 347.

29. Mario Llerena, "Función del personaje en la novela cubana," *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 16 (1950): 114-15.

becomes grimmer, at times even brutal.³⁰ By presenting the story casually, by not idealizing his characters, and by an unforced rendering of their speech, he achieves a consistent level of realism in this part of the novel, worthy of the masters of the second half of the nineteenth century.

30. Anderson Imbert, *Historia*, p. 248, and Orlando Gómez Gil, *Historia crítica*, p. 334, both use the word *crude* to describe Villaverde's realism. Episodes to which the term is particularly applicable are the description of flogging (III, vi, 457-61), and the narration of a suicide (III, vii, 175-76).