

# RACISM, CULTURE AND REVOLUTION: Ideology and Politics in the Prose of Nicolás Guillén\*

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*For Denah and, in memoriam,  
Don Raimundo Lida*

To think of Nicolás Guillén is to be immediately reminded of two observations. The first by José Martí, who, quite aptly argued:

La poesía es durable cuando es obra de todos. . . . Para sacudir todos los corazones con las vibraciones del propio corazón es preciso recibir de la humanidad los gérmenes e inspiraciones. . . . Sin estas condiciones, el poeta es planta tropical en clima frío, no puede florecer.<sup>1</sup>

The second, more recent observation, is by Frantz Fanon. He writes:

The colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope. But to ensure that hope and to give it form, he must take part in action and throw himself body and soul into the national struggle. . . .

To fight for national culture [the great Antillean insists] means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible.<sup>2</sup>

There are not, I think, two extracts, by thinkers so kindred in spirit, that more succinctly convey the premises behind the work of the great poet of the *son* or that more accurately and concisely underscore what constitutes the unique and particular character of his best verse.

That his poetry responds—and has always adhered faithfully—to the esthetic and political demands of those principles is something now beyond any dispute. It becomes evident to even the most casual reader of his verse. Written with “la raíz en la tierra, y base de hecho real,”<sup>3</sup> as Martí had also prescribed, that poetry—“classical” in caliber, genuinely popular, *mulata*, ecumenical, and self-confidently revolutionary—is one of the most authentic, most authentically American, “universal y cubana” that we have. This is no secret to anyone, least of all to those who, ignorant of their authorship, go about singing and reciting his verses. The work of all the people, of the humble and anony-

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mous common folk in whom it finds inspiration in particular, it is thereby returned to them. Far from indicating any disrepute or the fall into oblivion, that anonymity represents his most definitive critical acceptance.

Nevertheless, the universal consecration of the poet has tended, understandably but unjustly, to hide the merits of the writer of prose which are, moreover, considerable. As the least accessible—outside of Cuba—this dimension of Guillén's work, which is in perfect conformity with the passages cited above, goes largely unnoticed and is virtually unknown. This neglect is the more to be lamented when, as the most inattentive reader will discover, that prose contains more than one idea, addresses various issues, of particular interest to those of us from the "Third World." To become familiar with that prose would, at the very least, increase our appreciation of the synthetic—dialectical—power of his poetry. We will, moreover, be able to grasp, in all its extension, the breadth and scope of Guillén's vision and ideology. His prose and poetry mutually complement, reflect, and illuminate each other; they form part of an organic whole and bear witness to an integrated and "systematic" body of thought. The thematic preoccupations in both are, not infrequently, identical, as is the motive impulse that inspires them. So intimate is the relationship between them that his writings in prose can often be seen as first drafts of what will later be poems, and vice versa. Compare, to give only three examples, the article "Cualquier tiempo pasado . . . fue peor," dated 9 July 1960, with the poem of the same title published in *Tengo* (1964); and, from *La paloma de vuelo popular* (1958), the poem "Mau-maus" with the column, appearing three years later, "¿Qué harían los ingleses?"; or, finally "El alma de Moncada" (1941), which anticipates by more than thirty years the poem "¿Qué color?" provoked by Yevtushenko's response to the assassination of Martin Luther King and included in *La rueda dentada* (1972).<sup>4</sup> But, having said this, it is important to emphasize the intrinsic—literary and conceptual—value of Guillén's prose. Aside from its inextricable connection with his poetry, it constitutes an independent contribution to our Antillean and Latin American cultural inheritance. If he had never written a single line of poetry, the quality and content of his prose, its all-embracing scope, humane vision, and the passion to improve the world that informs it, would have already assured him a place as a distinguished writer worthy of our attention.

The son of a dedicated journalist, Guillén is early on, while still practically an adolescent, introduced to the tasks typical of that profession. At twenty-odd years of age he had already begun to show signs of the ease, ability, and poise of a veteran. When his *Motivos de son* appeared in 1930, the until then unknown poet already had behind him some years of experience writing for newspapers and magazines. It was

precisely with his work as a journalist that, within and outside his country, he would earn his living during more than half a century of fertile intellectual labor. Journalism will be his most direct, immediate and constant form of expression. Conscious of this, of the key role it has always played in his life as a writer, of what journalism represents as a powerful vehicle for the expression of ideas, he has never stopped exercising nor deservedly priding himself on what was, in any case, his first professional vocation.

His prose output is, consequently, extensive, varied, and prolific. Despite its very often circumstantial character—daily columns, speeches, commentaries, papers given at international conferences, lectures, “*ocios dominicales*”<sup>5</sup>—more often than not, it succeeds in transcending the ephemeral limits of its topical form or motif. “*Prosa de prisa,*” as Guillén himself would call it, it, nonetheless, evokes and stands with the best of our essay tradition. The attentive reader will find in it reminiscences of, among others, González Prada, Hostos, Mariátegui and, of course, Martí. (It is in Martí, no less, that we will find his closest analogue as a journalist. “*Tiene tanto el periodista de soldado,*” Martí wrote.<sup>6</sup> Emphasizing the point, Guillén underscores his own “*función de martillo intelectual.*”<sup>7</sup>) He shares with them the tone and attitude of one who, as he helps to shape it, speaks as a representative of his people; the critical, *radiographic* outlook with which they approach their societies; the ethical, moral, and patriotic fervor; the eagerness to teach; a sharp, alert intelligence nourished by a voracious curiosity and a vast culture; and, above all, an imposing sensitivity—a will—to style. The metaphorical and lyrical richness of his prose will not be inferior to theirs; nor its elegance and polish.

To all of this Guillén will add some very original touches: his catholic *mulatez* and accessibility. The writers of the nineteenth century were all, or almost all, white Creoles, members of the same patrician, bourgeois elite. They belonged to a class, then in historical ascendancy, whose interest in the “*uncultivated masses*” was focused on curbing its growing sociopolitical impetus or, among some of its most advanced and progressive wing, on paternalistically channeling and directing them. This will impose an implicit formal distance on their rhetorical practice: that is not their true public. They will speak *to, about, or on behalf of* the people; rarely *with* them; hardly ever, even in the case of those with a more democratic and radical ideology, *from and from among* them. This phenomenon assumes features as subtle as they are dramatic in a plantation society, like that in the Caribbean, where class consciousness is inescapably tied to a pigmentocratic consciousness of race. An obligatory theme, the black—synthesis and repository of its most burning contradictions—represented a fearsome unknown and, as such, a constant threat to the hegemony of the Creole bourgeoisie. He paradoxi-

cally embodies, on the other hand, its indispensable fulcrum as a source of labor and, in Cuba of course, as an uneasy ally in the struggles against the Spanish government and army. With the passage of time, he would become—demographically, socially, and culturally—a determining element in what continues to be the archetypal identity of the whole archipelago. The most convinced liberal, even when recognizing these facts, will not fail to register their contradictory import. He will be unable to avoid a certain condescension and, with respect to the black, the influence of a stereotyped, abstract or, at best, romantic-utopian vision.

The contrast with Guillén is instructive. To the eloquent and effective orator Martí was, for example, he adds the daily conversationalist, the friendly *contertulio*, of the popular—not populist or demagogic—outlook that informs his best prose. Martí's approach to the black was always fraternal, congenial, incorporative, humanistic, and within his context, inevitably revolutionary. Guillén will follow his example. He will, however, avoid that paternalistic and slightly *philanthropic* air one can still detect in the essays written by Martí on the subject and which, from his Afro-Hispanic perspective, the mulatto will criticize in several of his contemporaries.

His world will be at once different and the same. By the end of the last century the Creole plantocracy had entered into a state of crisis. Two prolonged wars, in 1868 and 1895, had noticeably eroded the bases of its economic, political, and social domination. The exploits of the Mambises, joining whites and blacks in the struggle for independence, accelerates the abolitionist process. They weaken the resistance of Spanish colonialism and, led by the liberal petty bourgeoisie, challenge the political leadership of the plantocracy. The abolition of slavery in 1886 would finally bring down the cornerstone of its favored order. It makes possible, simultaneously, the subsequent formation of a proletariat—rural and urban—of heterogeneous racial origins. The ex-slave is transformed into a salaried worker and, as such, is thrown together with the white. Cuban society assumes an ostensibly more democratic texture. Aristocratic pretensions to ethnic purity and racial superiority still reign, however. The black will continue to be the victim of discrimination and, along with the poor white, of labor exploitation.

The economic depressions of the eighties and nineties would further attenuate the power of the planter class. On the eve of the new century, the specter of bankruptcy having frightened the plantocrats, it will be entirely displaced by North American investment capital. The former landowning proprietor is gradually transformed into a middleman agent. Spanish rule will come to its inevitable end. With the military intervention of the United States in 1898, however, the revolutionary objective of independence is thwarted and the process of economic and political transformation and penetration is speeded up. The desire for a

genuine independence, thus postponed, assumes, under the pressure of events, a renewed urgency; the social process, on the other hand, takes on new nuances. Martí was able to anticipate American imperialism in all its implications but, fallen in battle, he never lived to know its reality: he is at once product and participant, far-sighted realist and lofty visionary, of a long period of transition. His prose ineluctably mirrors and reflects its salients and contradictions. Guillén, by contrast, is born with the republic in 1902: he must live with the consequences of that transition. His prose, in turn, registers the dimensions of this qualitative change. This explains, in part, the absence in him of the patrician manner and his appealing—but complex—simplicity. The “public” has changed. A new class, ethnically heterogeneous, has entered the stage. The proletariat, more than a potentiality, is now a fact. What was a class *in itself* begins, in the first three decades of the new century, to gain articulation as a class *for itself* against the remnants of the Creole aristocracy and its bourgeois and foreign allies. Heir to the revolutionary tradition of the Mambí and the rebellious spirit of the black slave, freedman or fugitive, Guillén will become a consistent spokesman of this class. He will see in it—in the destitute masses as a whole—the most powerful maker of history. As a Cuban mulatto, in him will coincide the dream of independence, frustrated by the action of the United States, and the aspirations of social justice of the colored and working people. In him the ethnohistorical affirmation of the country, the national imperative of sovereignty, and the social consciousness of class and caste will have their most intimate and profound fusion.

There are consequently three subjects that, with a persistence little less than obsessive and throughout his career as a writer, will repeatedly occupy his attention: the condition of blacks, the collective Cuban experience, and the overthrow of an ignominious social system. In other words: racism, culture and revolution which, in the final analysis, are no more than three aspects of the same singular vision of the world.

The first articles that, toward the end of the twenties, Guillén writes on the racial question issue a challenge, direct but generous and cordial, to his fellow citizens. The attitudes typical of a racist, once slaveholding society have not yet been overcome. The black, whatever his economic or social situation, was objectively and subjectively victimized by a tacit segregation in almost all areas of daily life. He was prevented from entering, save by unusual exception, any but the most menial, marginal, and poorly paid jobs. The private associations of the whites—clubs, fraternities, circles, casinos—exclude him. In more public places—dances, parks and town squares—an attempt is made to keep him “in his place.” The blacks, in self-defense, have no alternative but to come to-

gether in equally exclusive associations. The threat of a nation divided into two antagonistic camps thus becomes increasingly palpable. Republican Cuba, passing over in silence the most patent of its consequences, insists, nonetheless, on denying the existence of racism. Abstract and idealist blinders are imposed on the crude and harsh reality. The egalitarian dogma of a "democratic" and liberal republic does not permit, without compromising contradiction, open acknowledgement of so glaring a denial of its very premises. The segregation of blacks continues, therefore, as an open secret; racism, with all that it implies, will be the taboo subject. In this context, Guillén commits himself to the double task of confronting this duplicity and of calling for a greater rapprochement between blacks and whites. From the pages of the otherwise conservative *Diario de la Marina*, whose supplement, *Ideales de una raza*, was under the editorship of his friend Gustavo Urrutia, the young writer engages the thorny question. He begins by asking himself:

¿Es que después de dos grandes revoluciones contra España y después de la instauración de una patria libre, en cuya Constitución la igualdad entre todos los ciudadanos es dogma primordial, puede haber una cantidad de cubanos, por pequeña que sea, que se sienta diferenciada de la otra?

La respuesta es grave y, sin embargo [he goes on] debe darse. Sí, señores, todavía tiene problema la raza de color en Cuba y todavía necesita luchar para resolverlo. [1:3]

Guillén confronts those who, to avoid the problem, persist in denying it any caste particularity by positing what twenty-four years later the author of *Black Skin, White Masks* would call *the fact of blackness*; that is, the double alienation of the man of color. It is puerile to affirm, he points out in "El blanco: he ahí el problema," "que 'el problema del negro cubano es el mismo del blanco cubano.' No. Junto a su condición de cubano, el hombre oscuro arrastra su condición de *negro*, que limita a aquélla, y la verdad es que la ley no le niega ningún derecho, pero que el blanco le reconoce muy pocos" (1:11). What is denounced is not, therefore, a mere prejudice relative to a greater or lesser degree of education or culture but, on the contrary, an arrogant racial chauvinism that is hardly moved by distinctions of class or profession. It is a deep-rooted malaise that, among its many baneful effects, has a sociopsychological impact on its victim. Among its consequences is the much mentioned inferiority complex which, subtly suggested by Guillén, is criticized in the following terms:

el negro cubano tiene un gran tanto de culpa en su propio problema. Su enfermedad social es la timidez. Una timidez que asombra encontrarla aún en aquellos que por su preparación intelectual, su posición en sociedad y su solvencia económica debieran vivir en una atmósfera mental inaccesible a todas las inhibiciones. Preocupado, tan preocupado a veces como los mismos blancos contra los cuales grita, ve con frecuencia en éstos una preocupación que acaso no han sentido. [As a logical result] . . . ha ido el mismo negro excluyéndose en muchas

ocasiones de ciertos medios en los cuales, de intentarlo valientemente, hubiera sido admitido. Se ha sustraído a todo esfuerzo, cuando éste le habría sido útil, ya abriéndole muchas puertas que aún le están cerradas, ya agravando el problema hasta el extremo de que reclamara urgente resolución. . . . [1:8–9]

In his article of the same year (1929) “¿Periódicos negros de cubanos o periódicos cubanos de negros?,” he argues, for similar reasons, against the creation of an exclusively black press. That would be to fall into the trap of confirming their marginality and, beyond that, to acquiesce in a virtual renunciation of their undeniable Cuban identity. Guillén insists, and will ever insist, on the essential and active participation of the black: it is precisely that insistence that makes confrontation with the white unavoidable. It is not, however, a confrontation provoked by hate or resentment. What interests Guillén in these first essays is, first of all, to expose the facts, to shake people out of their complacency, and to issue a call for greater harmony. To do this he appeals to the intelligence and good will of his public: he has no more program than a liberal humanism and the irreproachable justice of his cause. The challenge he hurls at his readers, white and black, is that of a civic honesty which, by identifying them and accepting the burden of an essential Cubanness, would allow for the elimination of the defects, as anachronistic as they are harmful, of a racist society. His intention is not to castigate, but to congregate. His is a patriotic call, historical-moral in outlook, whose principal concern is to avoid, by timely warning and effort, “El camino de Harlem.” “Todas estas cosas son ciertas,” he tells us in an article bearing that title and referring to the various manifestations of racism in Cuba,

y cuando las digo no me anima más deseo que el sacar a la luz muchos de nuestros males, desempolvarlos y exponerlos al sol de todos, de blancos y de negros, a ver si es posible que todos también, convenciéndonos de que no nos queremos tanto como decimos, nos apliquemos a la hermosa tarea de actuar un poco en cubano, sustituyendo los abrazos postisos y los artículos de banderitas por un mutuo respeto y por una definitiva comprensión. [1:5–6]

Two years later, in the prologue to *Sóngoro cosongo*, he will reiterate that desire in the prophesy: “Algún día se dirá: color cubano.”<sup>8</sup>

The decades of the thirties and forties are, globally, the peak years of the negritude vogue and, in addition, of an intense reformist activity and acute political crisis. For Guillén they will be years of conceptual reaffirmation and elaboration, a progressive radicalization and the extension of his ideological perspective to the international scene.

Afro-Cubanism, firmly supported by the solid ethnological and scientific work of Don Fernando Ortiz, gains indisputable literary legitimacy. Despite its faddish limitations—that outsider’s superficial, thematic approach; that picturesque, exotic, lascivious and narrowly sensualist vision—it confirms the syncretic character of the national sensi-

bility. If it barely manages to go beyond suspect stereotypes and does not, on the other hand, succeed in mitigating the concrete situation of the black of flesh and blood, it nonetheless represents a not insubstantial acknowledgment of his ubiquitous presence. Guillén will highlight, with increasing zeal and vigor, the deep significance of that presence. He will more and more emphasize a constant premise of his thought: the essential mulatez of Cuba and, by extension, of the Antilles: "Desde 1512 ó 1514, fecha en que posiblemente llegaron los primeros negros a Cuba, hasta nuestros días," he notes in "Racismo y cubanidad" (1937),

ha estado integrándose todo un vasto y profundo proceso de unificación racial, de soldadura que . . . está en vías de formar la verdadera alma nacional, hecha por explotados y explotadores, por esclavos y libres, por africanos y españoles, por negros y blancos, pero todo ello mezclado en las sutiles proporciones de un verdadero jeroglífico, en el que ya es tarea harto enfadosa desentrañar, no ya en un artículo, pero ni en un libro, los elementos primordiales. [1:66]

His affirmation of Cuba's *africanía* is not, certainly, merely metaphorical or metaphysical. It is an historical and social fact of ethnic transculturation that is being pointed to. It is not a matter of observing a fashion, however seductive or compelling, but of giving expression to a consubstantial way of being and thinking. Unlike many authors of the *negrista* movement, that assertion is linked to a defense of the concrete person, with a tenacious and sustained struggle against racism which does not shrink from revealing its concealed and apparently more naive and innocent manifestations. His keen sensibility will be alert to every slip. His censure of Mario Fuentes Aguilera is characteristic. When, to praise him, the latter says of the patriot Guillermo Moncada that he had "alma y sentimientos blancos," Guillén, reminding him of the irrepresible mulatez of the country, exposes the racist premise. "No es necesario," he declares, "atribuirles a los negros un 'alma blanca' para que merezcan, por sus acciones, el respeto y la consideración de sus conciudadanos." And, going still further, he adds:

No vemos . . . nada de malo en elogiar el "alma negra" del negro, si es que con ello, como es de suponer, se alude a los elementos que integran el carácter, que así no hay duda que el alma existe y hasta se ve. . . . ¿Por qué no pudo Moncada tener un "alma" como su piel, y ser *por* ello, no *a pesar* de ello, el portentoso adalid que la historia admira?<sup>9</sup>

These observations, like those he offers in his analysis of the racist cliché "Odio africano,"<sup>10</sup> continue to have a surprising contemporaneity. His strikingly Cuban negritude is not a response to an occasional thematic interest which, once exhausted, would put an end to the *negrista* vogue; it is rather part of an abiding and uninterrupted identification. To it, by way of confirmation, will be added an increasingly pronounced social and political consciousness, more provocative, confident, and combative in tone.



The movement of national vindication that, in Cuba, seeks the revocation of the hated Platt Amendment, and an end to North American imperialism and administrative and governmental corruption, eventually erupts in the inconclusive revolution of 1933. But neither the fall of the dictator Machado nor the rescinding in 1934 of the amendment put an end to the intervening presence or corrupt governments. Revolutionary efforts intensify. Internationally, the Spanish civil war unites progressive forces throughout the world in an antifascist popular front. It almost immediately becomes a kind of rehearsal for the greater conflict of the Second World War. This atmosphere of urgency and crisis will have its impact on the life and work of Guillén. His sympathies will draw him closer and closer to the left. His prose begins to show a growing politicization. The liberal idea of society gives way to one at once more complex and comprehensive. From the descriptive demonstration of racism, which invokes the moralist tradition of the humanists, he passes to the examination of its ultimate causes in economic and social contradictions. In 1937, he finally joins the Communist Party (Partido Socialista Popular). The party which, in fact, accepts more blacks into its ranks, it is, because of its class perspective and its equalizing revolutionary aim, the one which most closely approximates the world he implicitly anticipates in his writings.

With Marxism his work acquires a scientific base and theoretical solidity. It also becomes more internationalist in outlook. In the same year, 1937, in a demonstration of solidarity with the Spanish republic in arms, he, along with Juan Marinello and Alejo Carpentier, forms part of the Cuban delegation to the International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture. His speech before that assembly fully demonstrates his effective mastery of the Marxist method. The denunciation of racism is intimately linked to the examination of class contradictions. His analysis of the issue, which now reflects a certain dialectic rigor, points to the socioeconomic interests which, to justify the unjustifiable, invoke fascist notions of inherent superiority. Hitler's depredations and ideology, which lead to World War II and genocidal murder, ominously underscore the identification of fascism and racism noted in those speeches. His essays of the period convey an unusual urgency, a continental and international concern, as they make that equation their point of departure. In "Cuba, Hitler y los negros" (1942), for example, Guillén warns his readers that in racially mixed America the Nazi menace, with its presumption of a "chosen race," threatens everyone, not only blacks. The admonition to local racists is clear: "Quienes crean que Hitler va a discriminar en lo americano—en lo cubano—siguiendo las mismas líneas divisorias trazadas por un puñado de esclavistas nativos sufren un tremendo error, que sería muy útil rectificar desde ahora."<sup>11</sup> The road to follow is also clear: "El deber continental, y por ende el deber cubano, es

el de enfrentarse con quienes tienen tan siniestros objetivos [of enslaving or exterminating] . . . la multifacética población diseminada desde el Cabo de Hornos hasta el Estrecho de Bering. Toda abstención es suicida."<sup>12</sup> The tone, the reader will note, has become sharp and risen in temperature.

With the postwar period, the irreconcilable contradictions between the capitalist system and socialism, kept uneasily in the background in the face of the Nazi-fascist threat, once again come to the fore. The "Cold War" promotes a furious anticommunism whose atmosphere, charged with McCarthyism, is apparent in articles like "El tremendo pecado de no ser fascista" (1950) and "Una detención en tres tiempos" (1952). There also emerges, with renewed vigor throughout the "Third World," the movement in favor of a radical decolonization that gains stimulus from the final triumph of the Chinese revolution in 1949. Guillén, who during the years of the "hot" war was fully aware of the tactical nature of that alliance,<sup>13</sup> becomes even more revolutionary in tone. Sought after as a writer and a man of firm commitment, he travels throughout the Americas and Europe and—in spite of the witch hunters—frequently visits socialist countries. His accounts of those travels articulate an unequivocal and rigorous condemnation of the capitalist system and, what he sees as its necessary corollary, racism.

During one of those trips, coincidentally to Moscow, he passes through New York. In Harlem he is struck by the fact that on Edgecombe and Convent Avenues a small bourgeoisie of well-to-do blacks enjoy "el celestial deleite de ser tolerados por sus vecinos blancos" while "en la 111, en la 113, en la 115, en la 138 millares de negros se arrastran miserablemente, al margen de la opulencia y alegría de la ciudad más rica del mundo" (1:24). The racial fact does not eliminate, though it does modify, the fact of class. Guillén summarizes his impressions of the great city, suggesting both its unfulfilled promise and its cannibal-like crudeness, with words that, to one who has experienced it precisely from the vantage of 111th Street, bristle with a graphic authenticity:

Me parece una ciudad cruel, pero instructiva [he says]. El desarrollo portentoso de la técnica norteamericana haría allí la vida muy simple, si la urbe no fuera tan complicada. Es decir, Nueva York logra el milagro de que parezca "normal" todo ese vasto aparato mecánico que es necesario para moverse a través de ella y que en otras partes sería cosa de asombro y maravilla. Diríase que es una ciudad hecha para buscar a dentelladas el sustento diario, deglutinarlo apresuradamente y saltar en seguida sobre la primera víctima que cae cerca de nuestras garras. . . . [1:27]

With suggestive, laconic brevity, he concludes: "Roma y Babilonia fueron así" (1:28).

His consideration of race relations in the United States is expressive of that "familial" link which he movingly evokes in the poem "El ape-

lido." Since "El camino de Harlem" (1929) it has always, naturally, been an element of his Cuban, Antillean, and Latin American concern. It appears once again, at the height of the anticommunist fever, in the series "Del problema negro en los Estados Unidos" (1950). But there is now a decisive difference. In the earlier article, to establish the contrast with Cuba, he emphasizes the practically insurmountable racial division that characterizes the metropole and, excluding any class analysis, argues for the peaceful conciliation that will give social reality to the historic Cuban fusion. The more recent commentary, recognizing the differences of context, joins both—Cuban and non-Cuban blacks—within the exigencies of an identical social condition. Any possibility of reconciliation, whether in Cuba or the United States, that presupposes an accord between the exploited and the exploiters, whatever their color, within the capitalist system, is rejected. Moral or "cultural" solutions are discarded as evasive and ineffectual: ". . . lo que el negro tiene que desear, en los Estados Unidos y en todas partes [he writes in the second article of the series] no es que haya diez o cien congéneres ricos y cultos, avicinados en Convent Avenue o en Miramar, sino que millares de negros desvalidos no se pudran en la miseria, en la ignorancia, en el dolor a lo largo de la Avenida Lenox o en el fondo dramático de Las Yaguas." The situation requires nothing less than a cathartic revolutionary upheaval, a fundamental change of structures. Opposing reformist programs that greatly resemble the now defunct programs of the War on Poverty, he adds, implacably:

La burguesía afirma mentirosamente en su propaganda que esa terrible situación [of socioeconomic inequality] desaparecerá con "la cultura", y está presta a tirar un poco de su dinero para entretener a los negros, domesticándolos de paso . . . la liberación del negro se halla muy lejos . . . [de ese] programa de intensificación cultural racista . . . también de ese abrazo patriótico que . . . sugiere [el cubano Gustavo Urrutia] entre blancos y negros en el seno del imperialismo. . . . No: el futuro entraña una solución más profunda, más drástica, más revulsiva, más históricamente justa, y es la derivada de un poderoso sacudimiento revolucionario. [2:70]

In Cuba that upheaval was to occur a few years later with the revolution of 1959. There will be more to say about the revolution later. For now it is important to stress its significance to Guillén insofar as racism is concerned. It means, in the first place, an end to North American imperialism in Cuba, the recovery of national sovereignty. The domestic program of redistribution of goods and services, moreover, puts an end to the predominance of the Cuban bourgeoisie. The radical—and finally socialist—politics of the revolution gradually but inexorably strip it of its most concealed holds on the economy and on society. It was, in a word, to have the world turned upside down. It meant, for this very reason, the elimination of the ground most conducive to the growth of racism. Guillén, needless to say, welcomes the event; his writings after

1959 generally begin with a retrospective look at the Cuba “of yesterday” and, as in his poem, “Vine de Lejos,” assess how far it’s already come since then. The historic fusion that, in the psychic and cultural realm, Guillén proclaimed as a consummated fact, he confirms can now count on structural support, foundation and reality. What he affirms in “Racismo y revolución,” (1966) is representative:

Los cubanitos y cubanitas que ahora se inician en el quehacer ciudadano no tienen que plantearse . . . uno de los problemas más difíciles de cuantos heredamos de la colonia: el de razas. . . .

La revolución . . . barrió toda esa inmundicia. . . . Al desaparecer la división clasista de la sociedad, perdió el racismo su más eficiente caldo de cultivo. Es posible que haya todavía algunos pequeños Lynchs escondidos o enmascarados, y algunos negros que quieran “irse”; pero lo cierto es que en Cuba revolucionaria negros y blancos marchan juntos, en igualdad de condiciones, y las generaciones próximas hablarán de razas entre nosotros como de un fantasma lejano y abolido.[3:301, 303–4]

The harsh accent, full of hopeful anguish, gives way to a spirit of praise and delighted satisfaction. He reserves his anger and condemnation, always tinged with a sharp irony and humor, for those who, throughout the world, cling to the perpetuation of racist and hegemonic class regimes. This leads him to satirize the English in Kenya, the North American government and its imperial politics, and the capitalist world taken as a whole. It allows him, in addition, to anticipate by nearly a decade—in “Junto a los pueblos africanos” (1967)—Fidel Castro’s celebrated speech about the historical ties that unite and the political and moral obligations that impose Cuba’s solidarity with Angola and the peoples of the “Dark Continent.”

Guillén, ever on the alert, never once lets down his guard. Nor, as the reader of his prose will see for himself, will he ever cease to attack racism for the illogical, narcissistic, and self-interested nonsense it is; for, in his own words, the “salto atrás en el desarrollo de la inteligencia humana” (3:147) that it represents. One final example which, in summation of all that has been said, may also possibly put on guard those who, with incautious candor, still observe or proclaim a *Día de la Raza* in our America:

Pensamos en el descubrimiento de América. . . . ¿Fue obra de una sola cultura, de una sola “raza”? ¿Fue obra exclusiva de España? Indudablemente no. Los conocimientos matemáticos indispensables para la navegación—de origen asiático—fueron introducidos en la península ibérica por los árabes muchísimo antes de que Colón naciera. El papel en que el gran almirante escribió sus impresiones del portentoso viaje fue inventado por los chinos, y lo mismo hay que decir de la pólvora con que estaban cargados arcabuzos y cañones. El acero de éstos proviene de Asia, tal vez del Turkestan. A su vez los descubridores y más tarde los conquistadores y los colonizadores conocieron en América la papa, el tabaco, el maíz, y los incorporaron a la cultura europea y universal. A todo lo cual hay que añadir todavía cuanto en varios siglos de convivencia han puesto y

ponen en ese coctel humano otros grupos, verbigracia, los indios y los negros. ¿Cómo va a hablarse pues de una cultura "blanca" exclusiva y pura en nuestro continente, sea portuguesa, inglesa, francesa o española? [3:147]

Culture, clearly, is a universal patrimony to which, with their particularity, all peoples contribute. Guillén approaches it from various perspectives. As a popularizer and critic he strives to keep his public abreast of what is happening on the contemporary cultural scene and, more often than not with a view to recovering it, of what has been inherited from the historical past. He approaches writers and poets, musicians, artists, and historical figures to give us their human dimensions as a necessary background to a full appreciation of their work. He assesses, with a critical or admiring eye, the measure of their achievement and limitations. He attests to their ethical, political, and human exemplarity. There is invariably a pedagogical intent and, in not a few cases, he suggests projects that might be undertaken. The range of his interests reveals an omnivorous reader, a militant as knowledgeable as he is active, a man of genuine urbanity and a subtle perspicacity. Through his pages pass, quite naturally, the most diverse people, as they are remembered by the poet or as they speak with him in a familial and almost anonymous intimacy: Langston Hughes, Pablo Neruda, García Lorca; Antonio Machado, Dmitri Shostakovich, Juan Marinello; Miguel Hernández, Nazim Hikmet, Jorge Amado; Vapztárov, the Bulgarian; Nezval, the Czech; Thaelman, Toussaint L'Ouverture; Picasso, Góngora, Dante; Mme. Sylvain Comhaire, the linguist; Henri Barbusse, Lenin and many less—and equally—well known. "Un músico en el frente" (1941), "Tres muertas españolas" (1946), "Nuñez Jiménez, el joven de iluminada madurez" (1952), "Sobre Jacques Roumain" (1961), "Cartier-Bresson" (1963), "Mariátegui, Vallejo" (1970) and "El poeta de Mongolia" (1971) are a few examples of this kind of writing.

As a producer and practitioner himself, he emphasizes the standards that govern his own endeavor. As an Antillean—as we have seen—he reaffirms and defends the mulatto roots of Cuban culture. In his exceptional "Presencia en el Lyceum" (1932), for example, he appears—ingenious, playful, with that gift for narration evident in so much of his prose—in the role of a conscientious critic of himself. Combining in a fictitious secretary—who is himself—the poet, interpreter, and publicist, we see him applying in the specific area of esthetics and artistic creation those ethno-historical-cultural assumptions to the analysis of his own poetry. In "La anticultura yanqui en la América Latina" (1952) and "Homero y Cucalambé" (1960) the same premises support, respectively, his rejection of imperialist cultural penetration and his consideration of what a poetry suited to daily life in a revolution might be. As an antifascist intellectual, he struggles untiringly against the anti-popular negation of culture summed up, with macabre starkness, in

Goering's famous statement "When I hear the word culture, I take out my pistol and fire." His aim, as he points out in his "Discurso en el Congreso Internacional de Escritores en Defensa de la Cultura" (1937), is "una universalización creciente del espíritu" (1:80). He is continually motivated by that driving urge to develop to the fullest the consciousness and cultural opportunities of the masses and, on the other hand, by the ambition to promote, as Gramsci might put it, "organic intellectuals" worthy of representing them.

All of these facets find their point of convergence and greatest realization in the Marxist writer. As a Marxist, Guillén will give preferential focus to three fundamental issues: the role of the intellectual, the relation between art and politics and, a cornerstone of his thinking, the dialectical nature of culture. His observations in this regard reveal a critical and open Marxism, wary of gross oversimplification; that is, a genuinely dialectical Marxism, devoid of any populist demagogy.

For Guillén culture—as subject, activity, and praxis—is not limited to a series of library books or museum artifacts, nor is it an isolated phenomenon. It cannot be reduced to a mere compendium of popular customs and manners, deprived of all vitality and dynamism, olympically uneffected by the circumstances which condition it, to which it responds, and which distinguish it. It is, on the contrary, a dramatic process of synthesis and supersession, of confrontation and selection, that resumes and is tied to those same contradictions, tensions, and antagonisms. Culture is nurtured by a concrete material base. It requires conditions favorable to its development. It takes shape at a given historical moment. Being itself a specific mode of production—through which, according to Marx, man reproduces himself in a particular way—it fits, in its turn, into the predominant economic structure. An eminently social practice, it implies and is involved in the entire productive process of material life which it reveals—and questions or defends—and from which, despite its role as "spiritual consciousness," it cannot be divorced. It is not, in sum, a vague and static abstraction but a vigorous and compelling reality. It is as expressive of the class struggle as any other activity in a class society. Guillén does not hesitate to make the point. "Hay un hecho que desconsuela profundamente a los espíritus ingenuos . . .", he maintains in "Tres muertes españolas" (1946), the first part of which is a kind of theoretical compendium:

y es que la cultura entraña un significado económico, de tal modo que la alimentación del espíritu mucho tiene que ver con la de una vísera tan vulgar como es el estómago. La cultura ha sido siempre en la sociedad capitalista un fenómeno derivado de la lucha de clases: sólo aquella clase que tenga en sus manos los instrumentos de la producción podrá contar a su vez con los recursos necesarios para enriquecer metódicamente la inteligencia de sus miembros, y arribar por lo individual hacia lo colectivo a estadios superiores en el desarrollo cultural. Como

consecuencia, en una sociedad dividida en clases, como esta en que vivimos, sólo privan, dominan, los intereses de la clase poseedora, que es la que manda.<sup>14</sup>

Upon initiating a revolutionary change in the capitalist economic structure, in the relations of production, socialism attempts—in the cultural sphere—to place within the reach of all “los recursos necesarios para enriquecer metódicamente la inteligencia” that are still the property and monopoly of “la clase poseedora.” This objective presupposes the destruction of the class system, but does not necessarily lead to the categorical rejection of what there is of value in the wealth of bourgeois culture. A negation and synthesis emerging out of capitalism itself, the revolution neither begins culturally at zero nor creates a *tabula rasa*. That would not only be absurd; it would be antihistorical. Culture—with a capital C—implies an ineluctable dialectical continuity. This compels the obligatory appropriation and reelaboration of whatever might be of service and useful in the superceded past. Just as capitalism, far from discarding, made use of the most useful knowledge and achievements of the feudal epoch, so socialism, absorbing and adapting them, will take possession of the lasting conquests of bourgeois society. Its scientific and revolutionary principles impose the responsibility and duty of giving the public access, in Lenin’s words, to “todo lo que había de precioso en el desarrollo dos veces milenario del pensamiento y cultura humanas.” Guillén, who quotes him in this regard, shares Lenin’s concept of a selective cultural continuity. His keen sense of history and his understanding of the class struggle put him at odds with the iconoclast *à outrance* who would suppress Michelangelo and Shakespeare, as reactionaries, as readily as he would the “complete works” of the author of *Mein Kampf*. There is, he declares in the above essay of 1946, “un pasado cultural que no debe desaparecer con la revolución; pero que ésta adapta a sus necesidades, recoge, critica y aprovecha para enriquecer el acervo común. . . .”<sup>15</sup> A central and constant premise, it appears regularly in his writings. In 1967, with the revolution in full swing, it appears with almost identical words. Commenting in “Lenin y la cultura” on Lenin’s cultural work and vision, he notes approvingly: “la cultura proletaria no podía ser hecha de una pieza, flamante e inédita. Había que conocer, criticar y aprovechar las experiencias de las clases anteriores para utilizarlas en la construcción de una nueva clase” (3:330). It is in this dialectical context, indeed, that his concept of the mulatto character of Cuba, the articulation of the historical singularity of the national culture, acquires its profound meaning and must be understood: it too represents supersession and synthesis, the natural result of a dynamic sociocultural process. Culture is, in the final analysis, a social fact—not a mere *thing*. As such, it implies a perpetual but conflictive *becoming*: “no pasa de una clase a otra . . . como un fardo o como un joyal. . . .”<sup>16</sup>

This is a totalizing concept of culture that includes at least one corollary of the first importance: all cultural work is unavoidably a political activity. The intellectual, the man of culture who is honest with himself, cannot presume to a nonexistent neutrality or aesthetic purity, and leaning on the purely illusory, become cloistered in the proverbial "ivory tower." That would be implicitly to assume an attitude of disdain and scorn for the very sources of his creative work. It, at the same time, reveals a rather suspect class ideology.

The role of the intellectual ought to be more consistent and just and—why not?—more communicative and generous. For Guillén, therefore, those "que se aíslan del pueblo y lo desprecian, encerrados en un hermetismo aristocrático, lejano y reaccionario"<sup>17</sup> are as censurable as those who, like the great Marinello, manage to "ascender hasta el pueblo y ponerse a dialogar mano a mano con el hombre de la calle" (1:237) are praiseworthy. The responsibility of the intellectual is precisely that: *to ascend* toward the people. His work, like that of Guillén himself, "ha de ser humana, y en las grandes crisis a que los pueblos suelen enfrentarse, encarnar y definir la voz de éstos, y ser arma para la defensa y el ataque."<sup>18</sup> In it must be manifest the purest union of the craftsman, the citizen, and the combatant.

Guillén, however, does not fall into the facile, anti-intellectual and false position which, by subordinating them, underestimates the specific integrity of art and all cultural work. Art and politics are indivisible, but art does not therefore stop having its own laws which must be respected. The fact is that to render politics successfully into art, one must have, in addition to talent and dedication, a stylistic and formal sensitivity. Neither the theme nor the most noble intention are enough. Both require a proper technical treatment. One must have an aesthetic consciousness and a sense of craft. Guillén thus argues against those who, neglectful of this aspect of their work, think that a revolutionary intention, by itself, justifies the product. "No es suficiente el contenido político de una presunta obra de arte para que realmente tengamos que aceptarla por tal," he affirms.<sup>19</sup> To merit the designation that content must be expressed with artistic skill and quality. The fact that a novelist, poet, musician, or painter places his ability at the service of the people does not relieve him of his obligation to pay careful attention to the efficacy with which he uses his instrument. Rather, it brings that obligation into greater relief since to do otherwise he would produce, besides bad art, bad propaganda. A commitment to the revolution does not excuse a lessening in the quality of the work: that would be to defraud the people. From the rejection of so-called "pure poetry"

no tiene que colegirse que . . . la poesía destinada a las grandes masas es un compendio de vulgaridades, un arsenal de lugares comunes, de expresiones manoseadas, con descuido de la forma y el estilo; ni que éstos han de servir a la



expresión descarnada de una verdad política, cuando la misma debe desprenderse, como quería Engels, de la eficacia del idioma, de su belleza y energía, todo logrado mediante el consciente, el angustioso, el durísimo trabajo del creador.<sup>20</sup>

The observation applies to the arts in general. Two decades later, Guillén reaffirms: "Cada arte tiene su oficio y hay que conocerlo de manera profunda" (3:306). The intellectual, in short, has to fight effectively with the weapons that are his own. This, naturally, does not prevent him, should the occasion arise, from taking up his rifle along with everyone else. But, insofar as he is a creator, he cannot deny his identity as such.

Another aspect of this same concern is his critique of leftist populism and, by extension, the crudest, most naive and forced social realism. The principle defect of this position is its arrogant presumption. It underestimates the intellectual and cultural curiosity of the people. It ignores the fact that—an effervescent and inexhaustible reservoir—the people are capable of distinguishing what is authentic from what is not, unadorned frankness from conceit in the trappings of simplicity. It seems not to know that its multiple and vital—dialectical—experience is not one reduced to the role of passive victim, and should not be circumscribed to the more or less dramatic or picturesque places in which it unfolds; that the people, in addition, is a constant inventor, an unrelenting opponent; and that it aspires above all to a continuous individual and collective self-improvement. Under the pretext of its supposed deference to the people, this populism tries—implicitly—to fix it within the frame that defines its own narrow outlook. It opposes, in an exaggerated way, the "cultured" to the popular, which it often confuses with the vulgar. In the best of cases, it reflects a conceptual error, a petty bourgeois retention; in the worst, it conceals an unreliable demagogic attitude of *lèse peuple*. It always implies an affront to the people. That, certainly, is how Guillén sees it: "Hay todavía muchas gentes honestas, honradas políticamente,—he says—para quienes lo culto está reñido con lo popular, y las cuales piensan que en la medida en que de modo más vulgar escribamos, hablemos o nos vistamos, seremos más o menos radicales, seremos más o menos dignos de la confianza de las masas. Esto no es sólo un soberbio disparate, sino un insulto al pueblo."<sup>21</sup> No minor insult when, with this *reductio ad absurdum*, the people are given something less than the fullest access to the broadest possible culture. It undermines the very objectives of the revolution. Lenin would be the first to challenge that willful distortion. For Guillén, his words conserve all their validity. He cites them textually:

Es necesario—dijo [el guía máximo de los soviets]—que los obreros no se encierren en el marco artificialmente restringido de la llamada *literatura para obreros*, sino que aprendan a dominar cada vez más la literatura general. Sería más justo decir—aclaraba—en vez de "no se encierren," *no sean encerrados*, pues los obre-

ros también leen, y quieren leer todo lo que se escribe para los intelectuales; sólo que algunos de éstos, los malos, piensan que los obreros tienen ya bastante con que se les hable de las cosas de la fábrica y se les rumie lo viejo y resabido.<sup>22</sup>

The error of those who think that way must be avoided.

Nor should one think, on the other hand, that it is simply a matter of substituting a vain, imitative, alienating and colonial cosmopolitanism for the legitimate primacy of national values. The Leninist precept is linked, in tight symbiosis, to the need to cultivate and strengthen what is autochthonous. One can only achieve universality by starting out from—and putting into it something of—one's own intimate character and personality. Guillén recognizes that "sin lo nacional, no existe lo universal" (3:379), which in no way implies any chauvinism. Gramsci put it very well: "una cosa es *ser* particular y otra predicar el particularismo."<sup>23</sup>

Guillén recalls that during the entire neocolonial period "el modo de ser norteamericano se convirtió (especialmente para la burguesía grande y media) en un modo de ser 'cubano'" (3:375). Cuban culture—like that of present day Puerto Rico—with its extraordinary richness and energy, was looked upon as inferior. Frustrated and isolated at every turn, the cultural worker had to manage as best he could to reach a public which was, in any case, small. A sort of cultural asphyxia and an almost endemic pessimism reigned. In such an atmosphere, the revolution, clearly, becomes the cultural fact of greatest transcendence. With the revolution, an enthusiastic labor of rescue and recovery begins. We had, Guillén says, "que limpiar nuestro espíritu y fortalecerlo, reconociéndonos en medio del júbilo victorioso" (3:376). A genuine cultural renaissance suddenly begins, the impact of which, overcoming the blockade, will reach beyond Cuba and have repercussions throughout Latin America and the world. The impressive success of the literacy campaign is already well known. To that sudden creation of new potential readers is added an unprecedented increase in publications of all kinds: texts, books, magazines. And in every field. The artist is suddenly confronted with an enormous, eager and expectant public to which he not only can but must draw nearer, and whose new situation calls for expression. The very amplitude—and originally eclectic character—of this florescence will require an articulated cultural policy and, naturally, the creation of the institutional structures to embody and put into practice the principles of a revolution on the move and under attack. Fidel Castro's well-known "Palabras a los intelectuales" (1961), the various meetings in preparation for the Cultural Congress of Havana (1968), the National Congress on Education and Culture (1971), and the First Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (1975) are some of the key moments in this process of development and consolidation.<sup>24</sup> The formation of the different corporate or associative bodies—from the Na-

tional Council of Culture to the recently created Ministry of Culture which replaces it; from Casa de Las Américas to more properly professional groupings—also marks the progressive rhythm and growing importance of cultural matters.

The content of that cultural policy revalidates the concepts which, since the forties and before, Guillén embodied. History confirms his vision. The new situation, at the same time, will give a dramatic immediacy to the struggle against imperialism in the ideological and cultural realm. This will be the repetitive theme of whatever Guillén writes; he devotes himself to encouraging intellectuals to deal with "temas relativos a la nueva vida, que es altamente poética, electrizante y atractiva para quien mira el mundo con ojos de futuro" (3:377).

In the same year as "Palabras a los intelectuales," in recognition of the high calibre of his artistic work, his Cuban representativeness, and the farsightedness of its encouraging content, Guillén was officially named the National Poet. A year later, in 1962, he was elected president of the newly founded National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), a position he holds to this day. That election—and his admission to the Central Committee—confer upon him, along with the honor, a great deal of responsibility. Homage and tribute are thus also rendered to the unshakable rectitude of the Cuban—American—writer who most accurately gauged the deepest pulse of his people, whose personality, in not insignificant degree, he helped to shape and make self-conscious. The cultural policy of the revolution, by confirming it, will give substance and authority to that sense of self. Its watchword, with a scope and compass reminiscent of Bolívar, is the one enunciated by Guillén in "Sobre el Congreso y algo más" (1971): "por lo que nos toca, la suerte está echada . . . América espera ser estudiada, defendida, divulgada en su propio lenguaje espiritual, y no en uno de préstamo o de alquiler" (3:367). He thus summarizes, simultaneously, the cultural policy of his country and the commitment which has always guided his own thinking. None other will be the burden of his addresses as president of the UNEAC.

In the realm of the strictly political—which, as we noted, is that of the strictly "racial" and cultural—Guillén reemphasizes and concretizes his dialectical concept of inheritance. Revolution, as idea, project, and reality, is in the first place the historical unfolding of the irrepresible imperative of freedom. It is, for this very reason, the *super* and *sub rosa* engine of a decorous progress and social democratization. It is not reducible to its necessary and triumphant embodiment: the isolated political event itself; rather it includes the hidden process of germination and development. It is at once a peak and a beginning. It represents the culmination of uncontainable sociohistorical forces and the exigencies,

both articulated and still nascent, of the new era which, as political event, it inaugurates. It is always, when it is genuine, a conclusion and a point of departure.

The revolution of 1959 is no exception. It is the final, exemplary stage of a century-long epic and, at the same time, the first firm step toward the second independence of Latin America of which Martí dreamed. In the twenty years that precede it, Guillén, denouncing the neocolonial character and the “inercia pantanosa” (2:297) of Cuban public life, dedicates himself to the critical analysis of its most significant historical antecedents. That is, to gauging the outcome and meaning of the experience, achievements, and commitments Cubans inherit from the independence struggles of the last century and, in this one, “los altibajos de un proceso histórico que, a semejanza del telúrico en los días aurales de la formación terrestre, experimenta sacudidas y desajustes muy profundos, antes de cuajar en una corteza definitiva” (2:61). It is not, to be sure, an exclusionary or exclusive theme. We have already seen how, during these same years, Guillén also devoted himself to the denunciation of Nazi-fascism and McCarthyism, and to the defense of Latin America, the Soviet Union, and the socialist world. The national theme, once again, is closely linked to a broad continental and internationalist outlook. “Haití: la isla encadenada” (1941), “Haití” (1942), “15 días en la República Popular Rumana” (1952), “Segunda Conferencia de Escritores Afroasiáticos” (1962), and “Viet Nam invencible” (1966) are but a few more examples of that multifaceted and all-inclusive preoccupation. At a time when—despite improvements in the means of transportation and communication—our islands continue to be mutually unknown to each other, the first two articles stand out for their perceptive and well-documented Antillean vision. They have lost very little of their timeliness. The first, especially, is a powerful and shattering expression of solidarity with the Haitian people, a *J'accuse* aimed at the dictatorship of Sténio Vincent which could just as easily be hurled today at the regime of the Duvaliers, under which freedom is still “un crimen terrible, que se paga con la cárcel o la muerte” (1:158). In “Jesús Menéndez” (1950), a concise reiteration of the celebrated elegy to that murdered labor leader and friend, he shows his indignation at the cynical complicity of the authorities and his awareness of who it is that acts behind the scenes. The examination of the inexorable movement of the revolution is, nonetheless, a recurrent and central theme.

The ultimate aim of his inquiry is, by an understanding of the historical tendency, to enhance and temper the revolutionary consciousness of the country and, rescuing them from being occasionally forgotten, to disseminate the stimulating lessons of those leaders whose ideas were most advanced and prescient. It is, in a word, to encourage the proper recognition of the rebel tradition which the present betrays and,

thereby, to inspire a worthy imitation that would carry on that tradition. He does not, however, succumb to a hollow and reverential retelling. He is interested, on the contrary, in emphasizing and putting in relief the social forces that the most important figures embody and that, at a given moment, enter into creative conflict. It is a Marxist analysis. His praise of figures like Carlos Manuel de Céspedes does not preclude a reproach of his personalist ambitions and his self-interested class politics. Between Agramonte and Céspedes, Guillén's sympathy, taking nothing away from the latter's merits as a precursor, will always be with the more radical and democratic outlook of the former. His standard of measurement is very simple: to what extent has each contributed to the advancement and fruitful and general progress of the revolution. Unlike the hero of La Demajagua, Agramonte—also a member of the Creole elite—did not harbor the ambition of an autocrat nor the fears of a slaveholder. The political success of his liberal intransigence favors the people more than the conservative's timidity. Agramonte, because of his greater personal disinterestedness and the far-sighted generosity of his revolutionary commitment, "se desbordó de su clase" (2:215). Martí, with even more resonance, would later do the same. Guillén gives him a well-deserved tribute: "No gozó, es cierto, la República; pero . . . tampoco la padeció. Su obra cumbre fue prepararla: concebirla como poeta, y ponerla en camino como político" (1:228). But his appraisal of representative figures is only one part of his examination of antecedents. The real hero, persistent, anonymous, gigantic, will be the people themselves: "los humildes, que no 'razonaban' la independencia, sino que la sentían" (1:228). They constitute an unmovable omnipresence which, step by step and gaining more and more consciousness, give that epic texture to the unfolding of the revolution.

The reader will recall Guillén's geological image, cited earlier. The metaphor is not casual. It appears in more than one of his writings. For Guillén the revolution—future homeland and luxuriant blossoming of the poor and exploited—is something exactly analogous to the hidden but ineluctable evolution of an imposing natural force. It arrives at its fullness with the patiently hurried push of a seismic movement or a volcanic eruption. It is prepared step by step: each recrudescence of the atmospheric pressure contributes to its incontainable advance. It is an idea that mirrors an optimism that is as indelible as it is unshakable. In the most difficult and discouraging moments, Guillén, sure of himself and his eye fixed on the equally certain future, never loses hope. His review of the history of his country—and of its pseudo-republican decadence—confirms that hope. Despite their limitations and momentary setbacks, the wars of independence set in motion the movement, now unstoppable, toward a definitive liberation of genuinely popular roots. They are successive phases in the same process of budding and birth:

“La del 68”, he writes in 1941, “es . . . una revolución patricia y noble, en la que el pueblo (al menos en los primeros momentos) constituye un elemento secundario. . . . Esa ausencia de savia democrática fue quizá una de las causas de los tropiezos iniciales de la Guerra de los Diez Años.” What follows immediately after gives the measure of his identification with “los humildes.” It might also be said that, to some extent, it describes the relationship that the latter would later have with the charismatic and resolute figure of Fidel Castro. Guillén writes:

Las sordas y aún públicas rivalidades entre los magnates, sus disputas de mando y de gloria, no hubieran surgido en los hombres de la masa, más alejados de tales contradicciones, que son frugales y sencillos, y entre los cuales el guía brota de modo natural, encendiendo desde los primeros instantes el ciego amor, el respeto vertical de quienes le siguen y obedecen. [1:205]

The economic and social conditions of the colony, the inescapable reality of slavery, and class distrust inevitably feed those disputes. Nevertheless, Guillén concludes: “A pesar de sus altibajos terribles, a pesar de su frustración circunstancial, a pesar del Zanjón inevitable, la Guerra de los Diez Años elaboró así, y adelantó en grado extraordinario, la conciencia revolucionaria de Cuba” (1:206). A critical achievement and leavening for the future.

The uprising of 1895, the almost exclusive achievement of the efforts and ideology of Martí, was destined “a obtener la proyección [social and political] que faltó sin duda a la gloriosa rebelión de La Demajagua” (1:228). The intervention of the United States denies it full success. It cannot, however, prevent—indeed it actualizes—the stimulus of its ideal and its example. “El 95 fracasó como ideal martiano,” Guillén declares in his article “José Martí” (1942), “pero éste no ha desaparecido, sino que se halla vigente en nuestro pueblo, ansioso de juntar todos los materiales de que la palabra patria está hecha, y darles palabra propia” (1:228–29). He also recalls the martyrs—Julio Antonio Mella, Rubén Martínez Villena, Jesús Menéndez, etc.—who, in the years prior to 1959, prepare with their blood the path of the revolution. Writing in 1962, Guillén summarizes in the following way his epic vision of the revolution that was to realize his ideals:

El 68, frustrado en el Zanjón, engendró el 95. Aunque pertenecían a una clase social distinta de la que hizo la epopeya de Yara, los hombres que se lanzaron al campo en Baire miraban asimismo hacia la independencia y libertad de Cuba. El 95, frustrado a su vez en el 98 . . . , renace en la Sierra [Maestra], y encuentra en . . . Fidel Castro la expresión más justa y elevada—más enérgica—de los ideales de libertad que animaron a Martí, aunque ahora sea también otra clase la que encabece el ataque. [3:78]

Resorting once more to the geophysical image, three years later he reiterates: “El, Martí, llena con su espíritu, con su clarividencia nuestra revolución; Fidel Castro le comunicará en seguida su personal di-

namismo telúrico, elevándola al nivel de nuestro siglo, armándola del marxismo-leninismo, convirtiéndola en una fuerza invencible y juvenil" (3:267). The masses, foundation and support, enter fully with him into the area of primary participation and, once again, the conflict is raised to a higher plane. A new stage begins: the hemispheric and continental stage. Its slogan will be Che Guevara's: *la victoria es segura, el futuro es nuestro*. The final outcome cannot be prevented. Two years after the triumph of the revolution, Guillén maintains: "Ahora viene la lucha sin pausa. Los términos que ella plantea son bien claros, y entraña la desaparición del imperialismo yanqui en América, como la lucha del siglo XIX derrumbó la estructura colonial española. Históricamente no tenemos ninguna posibilidad de perder" (2:379). This is a fact beyond dispute. It is necessary, on the other hand, to hasten the eventuality.

But, besides a historical climax and point of departure, the revolution in power is itself a process. In the articles published immediately after 1959, Guillén, in the midst of that revivifying whirlwind, captures the dramatic, tense and pressing atmosphere of those crucial years of survival. They are the years in which, in the face of the revolutionary determination of the *barbudos*, the United States, in alliance with the local bourgeoisie, participates in efforts to overthrow the new regime and prevent the proliferation of its example. They are decisive and demanding years. Between an ineffective proconsular diplomacy and shocked disbelief, we encounter, by turns, political and economic blackmail, a treacherous provocation, daily sabotage and, inevitably, military invasion. Their enterprises intervened, the North American companies, with Washington's support, begin by refusing to refine the oil essential to the country. The revolution refuses to abandon its nationalization and restructuralization program. Then come: the elimination of the sugar quota traditionally sold in the U.S. market; the breaking off of diplomatic relations; the expulsion from the Organization of American States; the blockade; and the C.I.A.-organized landing at the Bay of Pigs. Cuba responds to these aggressions with redoubled determination. A popular militia and Committees for the Defense of the Revolution are established. Cuba accepts the aid and friendship of the Soviet Union and, breaking the unilateral containment of the neocolony, opens up to direct trade with the most diverse countries. The Second Declaration of Havana, with its forceful reaffirmation of revolution on a continental scale, is its answer to the action of the O.A.S. The proclamation of the socialist character of the revolution that preceded it is made on the very eve of the victory at Playa Girón. These are years of rationing, of material scarcity and shortages of every kind. But they are also years of pride and invention, of an imaginative self-sufficiency, and of the struggle to prepare "a los que iban a manejar en lo adelante las centrales asucareras quitadas al imperialismo, y los que debían conducir navíos y levantar

aviones y administrar las antiguas compañías yanquis y dirigir bancos . . . y disparar antiaéreas."<sup>25</sup> Years, in sum, of a daily testing, urgency and heroism.

Guillén becomes an echo, again and again, of "este vasto proceso de superación,"<sup>26</sup> of the reaction it provokes among friends and enemies, and of the attitude of *patria o muerte* which underpins and defends it. He reminds and discovers; denounces and explains; awakens and animates. The vicissitudes of North American policy require a sleepless vigilance, but they neither frighten nor surprise him. Guillén remains calm and composed, becomes more and more determined and imperceptible before its recurrent intrigues. The nature of the contradictions themselves, he reasons, dictates the rhythm of events: "el imperialismo es incorregible. Nunca dará por las buenas lo que hay que arrebatarse por las malas. Y 'las malas' en este caso son 'las buenas': es la revolución."<sup>27</sup> The unprecedented breaking off of diplomatic relations does not disturb him. In reality, "esas relaciones habían desaparecido en la práctica . . ." (2:367) much earlier. That firmness and resolution as well as the historical certainty that reemerges in "En este 26 de julio" (1965) are typical of what he has written—and continues to write—in the restorative crucible of the revolution.

We want to recall, in conclusion, what was said at the outset: to think of Nicolás Guillén is to be reminded of the statements by Martí and Fanon. No one has been as successful as Guillén in discovering his most intimate and unique personal identity by giving himself completely, as a man and as a writer, as a poet and writer of prose, as a citizen and politician—which in him are all one—to the secular struggle of the collectivity. He once described himself as a "brizna escapada de un vasto dolor; eco . . . de una ardiente, poderosa y dramática voz" (2:172). This represents his major claim to glory. Certainly there are few writers who, like him, have succeeded in fusing so effectively the revolutionary militant and the artist of lasting caliber and quality or whose work, finally, exhibits such an internal consistency and coherence, so enviable an organicity. That it, in addition, should prove to be so popular—and so immediately relevant—is further proof of its exemplary and troubador-like integrity. What he wrote thirty-seven years ago in "Marinello" (1942), can with equal justice be applied to Guillén himself, for in him too "hay que apreciar su genuina fuerza interior, su contacto con el mundo, su vitalidad, su limpieza íntima, su rectitud, su sensible epidermis de hombre de carne y hueso, que registra todos los latidos del universo y los devuelve transformados en elementos de incontrastable eficacia para la lucha" (1:237–38). It sums up his own authentic greatness, his quintessentially Antillean universality.



## NOTES

1. José Martí, *Obras completas* (La Habana: Editorial Lex, 1953), Tomo I, pp. 873–74.
2. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 187.
3. *Obras completas*, Tomo I, p. 874.
4. The reader who is interested in these correspondences could also compare the final part of "Racismo y cubanidad" (1937) with the poem "Little Rock," included in *La paloma de vuelo popular*; the description of New York City—cited later—in "De Nueva York a Moscú, pasando por París" (1949) with the sonnet, from *La rueda dentada*, "A las ruinas de Nueva York"; or, from the same collection, the poem "Poetas" with the sentences that conclude his report "Diez años de la UNEAC" (1971). The examples multiply. For the detailed study of one of these examples, see: Hans-Otto Dill, "De la exposición periodística a la representación artística (estudio crítico sobre Nicolás Guillén," *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional José Martí*, año 63, vol. 14, no. 2 (mayo-agosto 1972), pp. 65–80.
5. Guillén gives this name to a series of articles that appeared during 1964.
6. *Obras completas*, Tomo II, p. 1619.
7. "¿Periódicos negros de cubanos o periódicos cubanos de negros?" *Diario de la Marina*, 4 de agosto de 1929. As is the case with various others to which we will have occasion to refer, this article is part of a manuscript collection which Guillén himself and the critic and poet Angel Augier kindly put at our disposal. As happens with some of those that are part of this collection, it does not appear in what is, to date, the most complete source of the prose writings of Guillén. That is to say, the three volumes of *Prosa de Prisa, 1929–1972* (La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1975) which Augier prepared. Unless otherwise noted, all of the references to Guillén's writings will be to this work. In the interest of greater brevity and convenience, those references, henceforth included in the text, will be limited to an indication of the pertinent volume and pages. In the case of those manuscript articles that do not appear in this selection, we will indicate, in a footnote, as in this case, the date and place of its publication or presentation. In addition, we want to express here our gratitude to their author and to Angel Augier for all the resources they have made available to us for this study of the work of Guillén.
8. *Obra poética, 1920–1958* (La Habana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1972), 1:114.
9. "El alma de Moncada," *Hoy*, 1 de julio de 1941.
10. "Odio africano," *Hoy*, 25 de enero de 1942.
11. "Cuba, Hitler y los Negros," *Hoy*, 8 de enero de 1942.
12. *Ibid.*
13. His defense of the Soviet Union, as an embattled socialist country, is constant and unchanging during the period of the struggle, as the reader of "Un músico en el frente" (1941) will be able to verify. He does not, on the contrary, fail to point out the contradictions of the United States' participation in a war for democracy and against Hitlerian antisemitism. "Contra Hitler, pero también contra Jim Crow," he says in "Yanquis y Mambises" (1941).
14. "Tres muertes españolas," lecture given before the Asociación Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Perú, Lima, 3 August 1946, p. 1.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
17. Untitled manuscript of a lecture to which, for the sake of convenience and because of its contents, we have given the title of "Poesía y revolución."
18. "Poesía y revolución."
19. "Tres muertes españolas," p. 7.
20. "Poesía y revolución."
21. "Tres muertes españolas," p. 5.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Antonio Gramsci, *Cultura y literatura* (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1972), p. 132.
24. For detailed analysis of the dynamics and projections of that process see: José An-

- tonio Portuondo, "Itinerario estético de la revolución cubana," *Unión*, No. 3, año 14, septiembre de 1975.
25. "Motores y mecánica," unpublished manuscript.
  26. Ibid.
  27. "Al primer tapón," *Hoy*, 1 de febrero de 1961.