

"Cuba...you have been my cross...."

POETRY AND PROTEST

by Carlos Ripoll

In 406 B.C., eight generals of the Athenian navy were brought to trial for abandoning survivors of a shipwreck after the great battle of Arginusae. The public clamored for blood; and the state, spreading a wave of terror, intimidated the assembly that was then trying the generals. They were condemned to death. Only Socrates dared to speak out against the abuse of law, identifying the generals as victims of an insecure government. "The true teacher," he had said, "must offer himself as a model of what he preaches."

More than two thousand years later the Cuban liberator and poet, José Martí (1853-95), was to follow this Socratic tradition, capturing its essence in the aphorism: "The apostle himself must be willing to pay the price required to further his cause." And, like Socrates, Martí lent legitimacy to his doctrine by offering his example and his life.

◊ Jorge Valls, a poet who has spent the past eighteen of his forty-nine years in Cuban prisons, was taught Martí's doctrine from childhood. His first reader was Martí's *Versos sencillos*, which his grandmother had him recite by heart. There he learned the rule of civic duty that was to govern his actions:

Of tyrants? Of tyrants say all
there is to say, and then say more.
Use thus the rebellion of your hand enslaved
to hammer the tyrant to the wall.

And there too he found a cause: freedom from slavery of every kind:

I know a sorrow profound
among the sorrows that have no name:
the enslavement of mankind
is of all the greatest shame.

In 1957 a group of university students opposed to the regime of Fulgencio Batista went into hiding after an unsuccessful attempt to storm the National Palace. When found by the police on Humboldt Street in Havana, they were killed outright. Seven years later the Castro govern-

ment tried one Marcos Rodríguez for having informed on his fellow students, the "Humboldt Martyrs." Only Jorge Valls appeared in Rodríguez's defense. Valls believed that the trial had been engineered for reasons that had nothing to do with the announced charges against Rodríguez. He asked only that justice be done, implicitly condemning the use of Rodríguez as a scapegoat.

Valls had been Rodríguez's friend and had personal knowledge of the events on which the charges were based. He was an important witness and, notwithstanding threats designed to intimidate the public, spoke out. Fidel Castro himself had warned that the court empanelled to try Rodríguez could just as easily "seat in the dock and publicly pillory" anyone who "questioned the Revolution" in its conduct of the trial.

There was ample reason to be asking questions. The circumstances surrounding Rodríguez's arrest and interrogation, the delay in bringing him to trial, the silence of the official Party newspaper—all were highly irregular or unusual. Then Castro, taking the witness stand, conducted himself as both prosecuting attorney and judge, rejecting the defendant's official statements and offering instead his own testimony on Rodríguez's answers supplied at an interrogation that Castro stated he had conducted in private.

Jorge Valls's effort was unavailing. Rodríguez was executed. But Valls had affronted those who lied or remained silent. A month later he was arrested and was held prisoner for almost a year before being brought to trial. There was cause for the delay: His crime had been to ask for justice, and that was not a breach of law. Then too, it is unwise for officials to be too obvious about revenge.

The manufactured charges against Valls carried a maximum penalty of nine years' imprisonment. Given the unsatisfactory results of the prosecution's efforts, the authorities suspended the trial and, without informing the defendant of his sentence, sent him to prison amidst rumors that he had been given twenty years.

TWILIGHT'S MADMEN AND THE MOON

Since his imprisonment Jorge Valls has taken part in every important protest staged by Cuba's political prisoners. Drawing on his firm sense of patriotism and sustained by his religious beliefs, he has withstood the many abuses to which the authorities subject all *plantados*, i.e., prisoners who refuse to submit to programs of indoctrination. Although beatings, hunger strikes, and denial of medical care have undermined his health, those who have been in prison

Carlos Ripoll is Professor of Romance Languages at Queens College, City University of New York. The translations of Mr. Valls's poetry are among those Dr. Ripoll has prepared for a bilingual anthology, "Caged Voices: Poetry From Cuban Jails."

with him say that Valls has always found the strength to console, to teach, and to give moral guidance to his fellow inmates. His verses reflect the pain and love with which he fulfills his sense of mission.

Damn, Cuba, you have nailed me!
I burst into flower for you
with the passion of my life,
denying myself over and over...
I embraced your children and I was
set ablaze with them
(my brothers, my beloved brothers,
my painful, hurtful, harsh brothers).
I suffered their pain and the pain
that they did not suffer...
I have been your living verse.
You have been my cross, and I have loved you,
for what is better to love
than a cross for reaching from the earth
to the sky?...

Political prison, which has often served as the most distinguished platform for Cuban patriotism, has brought out the best in Jorge Valls, both as a leader and a writer. Some of his work—letters, plays, poetry—has made its way abroad through clandestine channels. Part of that production was recently published in Madrid in a volume entitled *Donde estoy no hay luz y está enrejado* (Where I Am There Is No Light and There Are Bars). Valls's work has a single, consistent view of the world. The style and metrics, however, are as varied as the influences they reveal: César Vallejo, Federico García Lorca, Vicente Aleixandre, Octavio Paz, and José Martí.

To convey the horrors of prison, Valls in one poem compares himself with a rat that has found its way to his cell:

She came from the toilet pipe
and ran devilishly from death
awaiting in her and in my stick.
A hideous splash offended my legs.
Then a fright made my flesh cringe.
She jumped and fled, her tail long and bald,
her whiskers disgusting, slimy.
I didn't want to kill her, for she was alive,
she was the sister who most resembles me,
my sister the rat,
who disappeared with a leap
into the open belly of the sewer.

The moralist in Valls speaks through other verses that express a fear of the loss of spirituality and the dangers of materialism in the contemporary world:

Die soon, my son, there still is time.
Later the wise men of this world will come
with their bespectacled eyes
and muddy lives
with logarithms and cubic roots,
and they won't leave you even a little corner
for a beautiful, passionate death,
clean like the calyx of a lily.

Die while there is still time
for a fiery leap into infinity.
Later they say things will be so wholesome
that you will be sickened
if you see with burning eyes....

What is consistently revealed in Valls's poetry is his faith, his conviction that good will ultimately triumph—as in the following verse, in which divinity, symbol of good, finds refuge in the simple and the beautiful:

When men have finished banishing God
the animals will take Him in;
the doves: they have always been with Him.
The leaves on the trees
will be more than content,
for they will have Him to themselves
playing in the treetops
like a child swimming in the surf....
All this if they go through with His banishment
(they have already tamed Him
and put Him aside in a little pen).
But who knows?...
There is a conspiracy between children and flowers,
between beggars and driving showers,
between twilight's madmen and the moon.
A whole lower order of beggars
is implicated,
and they raise up their rags and sing.
Who knows if they will connive with the honeysuckle
and take Him to the forest amid stems of lillies
to crown Him.

POETRY AND MISSION

Condemned to death for preaching of truth and virtue to his fellow Athenians, Socrates addressed his judges: "I prophesy to you who have condemned me that, after I have gone, you will surely meet with punishment more severe than that which you inflict on me... For I tell you that there will be more accusers than there are now. If you think that you can prevent men from censuring the evil you have done by killing them, you are wrong...."

The writings of Jorge Valls, like those of other political prisoners who have chosen to pay the price of their protest, offer testimony to the truth of Socrates' prophecy. Foreigners invited to the island by the Castro government almost never speak of the horrors of repression in Cuba today, but outsiders rarely get a glimpse of Cuban penal institutions. Dostoevski said it well: "One can only judge a society after entering its prisons."

In making their caged voices heard abroad, shedding light on those abuses otherwise obscured from the world's view, Jorge Valls and his brothers also fulfill a sacred mission of poetry: to contribute to the ultimate victory of justice, which is history's lasting punishment for its jailers.