

# *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review*



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The *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* publishes essays, notes, queries, book reviews, letters to the editor, and bibliographies on Hawthorne's life and works, together with matters of importance to the Nathaniel Hawthorne Society, sponsor of the journal since 1975. The *Review* welcomes a variety of critical and theoretical approaches.

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# NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE REVIEW

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## Sophia Peabody Hawthorne's "Cuba Journal": A Link Between Cultures

Daniela Ciani Forza

My dearest Mother, a brilliant dawn attracted me out of bed and to a very early ride this morning, and the singing of the birds in the orangery were the only audible sounds of thanks giving; the only sound that broke the sabbeth [sic] stillness of nature. The dews are so heavy here that the world seems just made every morning. At the tip of every leaf hangs a jewel, which if value were to be measured by beauty should not be mentioned with the diamond, and every green thing looks polished and new & the inexpressibly [sic] claritude of the atmosphere allows you to penetrate further into the infinite above and around than it is possible to do in our climate. (19 Wedy, Badaracco 58)<sup>1</sup>

The passage is taken from the letter Sophia Peabody Hawthorne wrote to her mother on March 19, 1834, from La Recompensa, the plantation in Cuba where she stayed from December 1833 to May 1835, recording her personal impressions and feelings, which were later collected in the "Cuba Journal." The lines are themselves an introduction to Sophia's approach to the island. They give voice to the author's very special observations about its attractiveness and about her own absorption of its features, translating them for her audience in terms of visual as well as of sensuous significance.

The tone of the description is one of absolute wonder: nature in Cuba is so strikingly beautiful that it transcends ordinary imagery. Just as Columbus's "Journal of the First Voyage to America"<sup>2</sup> reads as an archetype of the first encounter of a European with the effulgence of the American landscape, so Sophia Peabody's "Cuba Journal" reads as an archetype of an encounter of a New Englander with *another* America. Her Puritan upbringing, her artistic goals, and her education were met with a world that, on the one hand, stood in opposition to her previous experiences, and on the other, fulfilled her artistic aspirations. In colonial Cuba, social conventions and customs were radically different from those of her austere Bostonian background, and, as we

shall see, it was precisely because of such differences that she was able to widen her horizons beyond the intellectual climate of her own environs. Notwithstanding its sophisticated and enlightened cultural development, her milieu did suffer from a self-referential ethos, biased as it was towards the affirmation of its Puritan American identity and, at the same time, a still lively fascination for European culture. Cuba offered Sophia the touch of an unknown leisurely tenor of life, which she reported in great detail, thus stirring the curiosity of her Bostonian friends, who were enthralled by her descriptions. The unexpected attractiveness of the island aroused in her a passion for depicting its nuances in letters and drawings of singular care, both reflecting the delicacy of her sensibility and artistic bent, her adherence to the spirit of the transcendentalist tenets she cultivated, and her desire to absorb wider realities than those in which she grew up. Nature in all its tropical splendor offered her a tangible experience of Emersonian philosophy. In describing a sunset and subsequent thunderstorm, she wrote:

Such a sunset!!! Alas! How unspeakably magnificent. It has all come suddenly too – as if from the overflowing horn of Infinite beauty had unawares poured out the very effervescence of the cup - There has been a thunderstorm – truly tropical – I could think of nothing but the battle of the angels described by Milton [...] - The rattling, crashing, growling claps were sometimes overpowered by one long peal afar off - & that seemed the voice of GOD heard above the din of combat. (Tuesday 8th, Badaracco 117)

She thus depicted a communion between her emotional perception of nature's "Infinite beauty" and her intellectual and religious beliefs, singularly connecting her North American persona with that of the Caribbean world.

### Turning toward a softer climate

The sojourn in the tropical island was undertaken to cure Sophia from the headaches which had plagued her for a decade, and which had developed into an almost chronic ailment from 1829 on. During these years, too feeble to deal with ordinary chores, and often confined to her room for rest, when even the slightest noise pained her like "excruciating torture,"<sup>3</sup> Sophia confronted her infirmity by advancing her already

refined education and artistic disposition, and vividly partaking in the zeal of the insurgent renaissance in New England. Supported by her mother and her sisters, Elizabeth and Mary, she was introduced to a circle of elevated scholars and artists<sup>4</sup> whose company encouraged the cultivation of her own talents. Washington Allston was among them. One of the most prominent American painters of the time, he aroused in Sophia new enthusiasm for art by offering her insights into his own approach to painting and by instructing her on pictorial techniques. Allston also advised her to travel and gain direct experience with classical art, suggesting that a trip to Italy, bringing her into contact with Italian landscapes, would enhance her artistic talent.<sup>5</sup>

Sophia's health would not allow for such a demanding journey overseas. An alternative was represented by the nearby island of Cuba, which, in those days, was attracting more and more Americans for recreation and convalescence. Medical practices were operated by North American doctors for the convenience of fellow American invalids,<sup>6</sup> and commerce and business were actively promoted while new hotels, boarding houses, bars and entertainment concerns expanded in the major cities and along the coasts. These North American practices greatly encouraged a familiarization between the United States and its neighboring "modern Eden," as Abbie Brooks (Silvia Sunshine) termed it (478), mostly disregarding, though, the import of Cuba's complex cultural reality.

In fact, not only was the United States exerting its political and economic power to draw the island into its sphere of influence because of its strategic position in the Caribbean Sea, but, in following its expansionistic strategies, it also strongly advocated an increasing acquaintance between the North American and the Cuban peoples. Such close connection served to consolidate North Americans' domestic pride, to persuade them of their superiority, and, more intriguingly still, to attract Cubans to their more comfortable life-style.<sup>7</sup>

Due to its tropical climate, lavish nature, amusing and curious sights, and *laissez-faire* attitudes, Cuba was indeed regarded as a *locus amoenus* for both spiritual and physical regeneration, as is testified by William Cullen Bryant's letters from his 1849 trip to Cuba. In the *post scriptum* to his letter of April 8, from Havana, Bryant writes: "the weather is so delightful—the temperature warm, but not hot—the sea wind, which blows the greater part of the day, seems health itself and the weather

is constantly fine." Dwelling on the spell of the island in a letter dated April 10, he again insists on the suavity of life in Cuba, and he writes, "I find that it requires a greater effort of resolution to sit down to the writing of a long letter in this soft climate, than in the country I have left. I feel a temptation to sit idly, and let the grateful wind from the sea, coming in at the broad windows, flow around me, or read, or talk, as I happen to have a book or a companion" (Bryant 27). His descriptions of landscapes are full of references to the mildness of the climate and the pleasant atmosphere, as this was an overwhelmingly relaxing setting. Perfectly aware as he was of the political strategies behind the United States' and Cuba's aims of reciprocity,<sup>8</sup> he still could not but yield to the intrinsic fascination of the island, whose ambiance he described as the ideal setting for a rebirth into *otium*.

Indeed, as Louis Pérez, Jr. affirms in his study on Cuban American interrelations:

Cuba entered the North American imagination as the 'tropics,' which is to say, as the opposite of what the United States was, specifically what it was not. [...] the island gave a new meaning to recreation and, if not to life eternal, certainly to life anew, [...] North American tourists arrived by the thousands. At midcentury about five thousand vacationers and visitors travelled from the United States to Havana annually. (Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar* 22)

At the same time, the North American presence "served both as a source of change and a measure of change and increasingly assumed structural form inside Cuba" (Pérez, *Slaves, Sugar* 24–25), opening the way to new hopes for innovations and development for the Cuban people, eager as they were to free themselves from the restrictions colonialism imposed on them.

With Dr. Channing advocating for Sophia a cure in a mild climate,<sup>9</sup> and with Allston encouraging accurate observation of all nuances of the natural world—so as to grasp its peculiar essence and translate it into the wonders of colored sketches<sup>10</sup>—it was agreed that a solution should be sought allowing Sophia to recover from her illness in a more suitable environment than New England, while at the same time firing her passion for art. Elizabeth, the oldest and most enterprising of the Peabody sisters, received information that the Morrells, a well-to-do family residing some fifty miles south-west of Havana, needed a tutor

for their two sons and one daughter. A stay outside the boisterous bustle of the capital itself<sup>11</sup> seemed the most appropriate solution for Sophia's need for open air and tranquility, and arrangements were soon made for Mary to offer her services tutoring the Morrell children in exchange for Sophia's stay at La Recompensa. The environment was most suitable for the two young ladies. Robert Morrell was of Swiss Huguenot heritage. His family had first migrated to Santo Domingo, then to Georgia, and finally to Cuba, where he now possessed extensive coffee and cotton plantations and practiced his profession as a medical doctor. Laurette Morrell was the daughter of A. Louis de Tousard, a French military man who fought during the American Revolutionary War with the Marquis de Lafayette and was a friend of George Washington.<sup>12</sup> Thoroughly colonial in their behavior, quite keen on maintaining European aristocratic customs of refined cultural modes, but nevertheless complacent as to the social inequalities hovering over the country, the Morrells also assumed North America's more pragmatic manners. Sophia would enjoy the novelty of a friendly and refined society—polyglot and dedicated to the arts—and would be surrounded by beauty and tranquility. Mary would not be so involved in the pleasures of colonial luxuries, but would strengthen her anti-slavery convictions, never refusing, though, to acknowledge the Morrells' courtesy and the delights of the surrounding landscape, where, as she wrote, "the roads are filled with flowering myrtle, convolvuluses [sic] of every kind, and many flowers of brilliant hues, which I never saw before" (Jan. 8, 1834, Badaracco 183).

The journey was properly planned following all the formalities of a genteel code of behavior. The two sisters were accompanied by Madame Gerault,<sup>13</sup> who attended to them on board the *Newcastle*. They also received the careful attention of the handsome Bostonian businessman James Burroughs, who had known Sophia from the time she was hosted at his sister Mary Rice's boarding house on Beacon Hill.<sup>14</sup> Once in Havana, the sisters were received by the American vice-consul to Cuba, Richard Cleveland, and by his wife Mary, who were friends from Salem and Lancaster and who, given their experience on the island, had also been benevolent counselors from the moment the sisters began to plan their Cuban journey. The Clevelands hosted the sisters during their first few days in the capital, offering them a first taste of the capital's rambunctious life, before Sophia and Mary started for La Recompensa,

enjoying the view of “magnificent estates” and riding along “such rows of palms” (Jan. 13, 1834, Badaracco 12), as Sophia immediately noted with enthusiasm.

### American travel books versus Sophia’s “Cuba Journal”

As already mentioned, it was not uncommon for wealthy North Americans—businessmen, artists, ladies—to visit the island, and most of them held forth both on the island’s enchanting beauty and on its political conditions under Spain’s rule. Reporting one’s thoughts in what Borm defines as “travel books” or “travel literature” (Borm 15)<sup>15</sup> developed into a common practice among visitors. Travelogues, journals, diaries, and tourist guides on Cuba proliferated, testifying to the charm the island exerted on North Americans, whether for its exotic landscapes and alien customs, or as a result of their aspirations of profit and political interference.<sup>16</sup> Confirming both Caesar’s and Schriber’s<sup>17</sup> assessments of nineteenth-century American travel writing, the general tenor of this production conveys strong admiration for the amenity and agreeableness of the island’s nature and relaxed manners, but also ambiguous curiosity as to its history, its social idiosyncrasies, and its contradictions, which doubtlessly helped to substantiate North Americans in their belief that they were God’s chosen people, rather than to encourage them in deeper confrontation.

Quite in line with this attitude is Dana’s diary, whose title, *To Cuba and Back: A Vacation Voyage*, thoroughly reflects the author’s angle. The stress on the adverb ‘back’ and on the purpose of his visit as a ‘vacation voyage’ overtly connote his approach to and interpretation of the island: a short stay, enjoying Cuba’s natural attractiveness, ‘travelling through’ its peculiarities, socio-political conditions and the indigenous cultural features. Always, however, he maintains the American orientation of his thoughts, detached as it was from the permeating Spanish and Creole spirit of the island. His descriptions of Cuba’s relaxed atmosphere and intense beauty do not diverge from those of his contemporaries:

The restaurant with cool marble floor, walls twenty-four feet high, open rafters painted blue, great windows open to the floor and looking into the Paseo, and the floor nearly on the level with the street, a light breeze fanning the thin curtains [...] the gentlemen in white pantaloons and jackets and white stockings,

and the ladies in fly-away muslins, and hair in the sweet neglect of the morning toilet, taking their leisurely breakfast of fruit and claret, and omelette and Spanish mixed dishes, (ollas,) and café noir. How airy and ethereal it seems! They are birds, not substantial men and women.

[...]

[...] The royal palm looks so intensely and exclusively tropical! [...] The palm-tree seems a kind of *lusus naturae* to the northern eye—an exotic wherever you meet it. It seems to be conscious of its want of usefulness for food or shade, yet has a dignity of its own, a pride of unmixed blood and royal descent,—the hidalgo of the soil.

No matter his fascination with the islanders’ demeanor and the tropical beauty of the surroundings, he cannot avoid denouncing the restrictions imposed on the island by a ruler so distant and uninterested in its development, and so antithetical to North American ideological bearings:

To an American, from the free States, Cuba presents an object of singular interest. His mind is occupied and almost oppressed by the thought of the strange problems that are in process of solution around him. He is constantly a critic, and a philosophizer, if not a philosopher. A despotic civil government, compulsory religious uniformity, and slavery are in full possession of the field. (Dana 42–43, 104, 225)

Referring explicitly to the political condition of Cuba, and to the United States’ determination to annex the island,<sup>18</sup> Dana wrote that: “Their future seems to be hanging in doubt, depending on the action of our government, which is thought to have a settled purpose to acquire the island” (78). Even though many Cubans approved of annexation rather than continuing to tolerate Spain’s authority, they “fear[ed] that the Anglo-Saxon race would swallow up the power and property of the island, as they have done in California and Texas, and that the Creoles would go to the wall” (229),<sup>19</sup> thus underlining the ambiguity of the relationship that linked the two countries, and which would be determinant in the definition of Cuba’s independence.

With its focus on the island’s exotic glamour, its nuanced descriptions of Cuban daily life and people, and personal statements about

the major questions connecting the island's condition with the decay of the Spanish Empire, which still subjected Cubans to its harsh rules, Dana's *To Cuba and Back: A Vacation Voyage* remains an example of how North American visitors viewed Cuba. By piquing curiosity and drawing attention to the challenges Cuba offered their countrymen, the travelogue prepared the reader for an encounter with *otherness*. It asserts differences—consternation at times—and, not the least relevant, the innuendo that the United States should eventually *free* Cuba from the deadlock of Spanish colonization, which, although Dana himself did not appear to approve,<sup>20</sup> was certainly in the air.

Joseph J. Dimock's *Travel Diary* is another example of a foreign understanding of Cuba, specifically from the point of view of a North American. Dimock traveled to Cuba in 1859, and his connection with the island was not that of a simple tourist, or observer, but that of a businessman who had access to the inner aspects of Cuban private and public life, being involved in transactions with the United States on behalf of his wife's family, who operated sugar plantations and mills near Cienfuegos and in Matanzas. His observations come from direct experience—from everyday contacts with the local population; he analyzes and compares Cuban habits and institutions to those of his home country.<sup>21</sup> For example, he first announces that "I give my impressions of Cuba, just as I receive them, many probably crude and perhaps incorrect, as to statistics, etc., but what I have seen I give as I have seen with Yankee eyes" (71). And à propos the crucial question of slavery, he writes, "The slave trade will exist just so long as Spain holds the island [...] Our American squadron would do more to suppress the slave trade, and also to protect American interests here, if stationed around the island of Cuba, and the time will come I imagine when such will be the case" (100).<sup>22</sup> Thus, he fully articulates North America's unequivocal ambitions toward the island and its institutions.

Quite the reverse of those of the "philosophizers" from "the free States" who conceived "frivolous" narratives of the island,<sup>23</sup> is Sophia Peabody Hawthorne's response to its wonders. I agree with Rodrigo Lazo in "Against the Cuba Guide" that the "Cuba Journal" goes "against" the vogue of the genre,<sup>24</sup> or of simple travelogues. The letters it contains touch on all the usual issues of North American disquisitions on the island at the time, but what intrinsically distinguishes them from other

travel literature is their detachment from any pretension to make her experiences and observations public.

The correspondence was meant for confidential communication. It extended to her mother, in particular, her thoughts and feelings as her stay in Cuba was gradually relieving her from illness and allowing her to enjoy an environment that granted her totally new perspectives on daily habits of life and privileged her with full immersion in the marvels of nature. Though chronicling her frail health, which, for all the pain it caused her, still constituted "a refuge from the thousand annoyances" (Channing, in Marshall 195) that Mary was charged with, the letters convey Sophia's concern for her inner self, represented by her natural affection for enlightened company, and her subtle curiosity about the world around her that quenched her intellectual and artistic thirst.<sup>25</sup>

The intensity of Sophia's observations and the novelty of the world they related encouraged Elizabeth to extend her sister's artistic descriptions of the tropics to the family's intellectual circles in Boston,<sup>26</sup> by holding public readings of them. Sophia, having herself enjoyed the practice in Bostonian society of sharing letters, information, and new ideas, claimed, instead, that her thoughts should remain private, as she bitterly urged her mother in a letter of December 9, 1834:

I do not like at all that my journal should be made such public property of – I think Betty is VERY naughty to send it around in the way she does – just as if it were a published book. It is really a great cross to bear – I feel as if the nation were feeling my pulse. There are a great many little bursts & enthusiasm & opinions & notions in it which I do not relish having exposed to such congregations – If I were stuck up bodily upon a pole & carried about the streets I could not feel more *exposed* than I do at the idea of everybody's reading over my journal to you. Betty is too bad. I assure you I am really provoked. I shall be ashamed to show my face in the places they knew me – for it seems exactly as if I were in print – as if every body had got the key of my private cabinet & without leave of the owner – are appropriating whatever they please. (Tuesday 9, Badaracco 470–471; author's emphasis)

Such a determination, somehow in contradiction with her own delight in intellectual correspondence, underlines the originality of Sophia's travel writing. Her letters were, indeed, not just personal missives to her mother. Rather, as Valenti keenly observes, "writing to her mother was

tantamount to writing for herself, a very secure audience to whom she might reveal all her 'bursts & enthusiasms'" (Valenti 83) spontaneously, while her relation to the new environment fostered an inner growth of existential quality. Again in a letter dated May 16, 1834, Sophia stresses the concept by stating that, unless she corresponds regularly with her mother, she will "lose many interesting things," besides, of course, that she would feel "as if I was disloyal to the strongest wish of my heart, which is to entertain you, and keep you advised of my where abouts and what abouts till I appear before you in my proper person" (May 16, 1834, Badaracco 86). Once more she denotes the confidential character and aim of her daily records and personal thoughts, which she felt unready to share publicly, and which she extended only to Eliza out of filial devotion.

Quoting Blanchot's "Le journal intime et le récit," we may affirm that the interest of Sophia's "Cuba Journal" consists precisely in "*son insignifiance*" (224), the apparent irrelevance, that is, of her remarks on Cuban life, its society, its mores, and its ambiance. Here lies the immediacy of her reflections. The "many interesting things" she confides to her mother are the details by means of which she measures her own growing awareness, both of the island and of her own self. Again, we may assert with Blanchot that: "*le journal intime qui paraît si dégagé des formes, et si dociles aux mouvements de la vie et capable de toutes libertés*" (224).<sup>27</sup> It's confinement to the loose rhythms of daily occurrences is, indeed, what saves its message from distortions: "*ce qui s'écrit s'enracine [...] dans la perspective que le quotidien délimite. Les pensées les plus lointaines, le plus aberrantes, sont maintenues dans le cercle de la vie quotidienne et ne doivent pas faire tort à sa vérité*" (224). Just as Dickinson's poem 441, "The simple News that Nature told," reveals to the poet the majesty of the outer and inner worlds, so Peabody metonymically translates, through the immediacy of her observations, Cuban identity—and its *otherness*—into a full comprehension of its profound, *fragmented* reality. Her "intimate-sketches," as Pamela Lee<sup>28</sup> terms her prose imbued with pictorial touches, are impressionistic suggestions in which color, sound, and movement all contribute to her epiphanic visions of the Cuban landscape. Despite the impression the journal offers of a spontaneous flow of effusive responses to the "many interesting things" that attracted

her daily, it documents, rather, instances of the pure transparency and intense perception of her encounter with the island.

We went through the Bretos and Almirante estates before we arrived at our destined haven, which was the most superb bamboo avenue, that I have yet seen. The approach to it is through two short allées of palms, which I represent by these four straight lines [sketch], along which is planted a thick hedge of roses in full bloom, a laguna or small lake is between surrounded also with this rose hedge and like wise with the lime trees trimmed & pruned so as to resemble a diadem of brilliant green. In the centre of the lagoon is a little Islet from which a stately palm rises in solitary pride, giving a beautiful finish to the whole. Passing that, you enter the solemn shade of this natural gothic aisle of bamboos which so baffles description. Imagine a host of plumes, nearly an hundred feet high, of rich green, falling together above and you may have some idea of it. [...] Their immense Altitude makes them bend with their own weight and the fine delicate foliage gives a plumy feathery aspect to the whole. Were it not for their loftiness and the gothic form they assume, they would be perfect emblems of beauty & grace; as it is there is a slight mingling of the grand and imposing in their combined effects. Edward and I rode to the very end and back lothe [sic] to leave such a bower; but it was too late to linger. My young knight dismounted to gather me a bunch of tea roses and some of those superb lilies (white) which hang from quite a tree like so many ivory bells, ready to chime at the first breath of wind, and giving forth odour like that of our Narcissus, but more delicious. (Feb. 14, 1834, Badaracco 33–34)

Drawing on Blanchot's assertions on journal writing once again, we can see how the passage chosen here, which in the manuscript also includes a sketch, proceeds at the rhythm of Sophia's aesthetic appreciation of the scene she meets, seemingly heedless of formal restraints and only complying with the fluidity and earnestness of her emotions. Her description of the horseback ride *penetrates* the landscape, collapsing the boundary between observer and observed. Adjectives and attributes add strokes of significance to the passage, conveying it beyond the mimetic level implied in the mere recounting of occurrences. The combination of the two terms "destined haven," at the beginning of the citation, modifies the information regarding the locality Sophia and the young



Edward are heading toward. The past participle “destined,” although bearing the same signification as ‘destination-point of arrival,’ points to the idea of *destiny*—supreme fate—thus *anticipating* for the reader the event of gaining the *shelter* of beauty she has sought with all the fervor of her creative sensibility. The “approach to it” therefore resounds as the cadenced accomplishment of a coveted desire, from which a vision of paradisiacal allure opens up. The scenery is depicted in all its nuances of colors and shapes: the roses are in “full bloom,” trees are “trimmed & pruned,” resembling “a diadem of brilliant green,” the palm is “stately” and rises in “solitary pride,” the bamboos cast a “solemn shade” onto a “natural gothic aisle,” their “rich green” leaves resemble a “host of plumes,” their height is referred to as “immense Altitude,” and altogether they appear as “perfect emblems of beauty & grace.” Unlike the numerous descriptions we find of the attractiveness of tropical landscapes, where everything grows untamed and unspoiled by human intervention, nature is here connoted by the scrupulous care that has been devoted to it, and by a sequence of anthropological signs which elevate its significance to that of human properties. The text, moreover, constantly alludes to Sophia’s refined illustrative touch, as can be seen in the glowing visualization of the site, or to her refined education, as is shown by the use of the French word “allées,” which adds allure to the more common pathways, or of the architectural term “gothic,” attributed to the “aisle” where the bamboos grow. Her leisurely lingering over the landscape is a translation of the pleasure she derives from this site, which, as (*in a painting*), is beautifully arranged. Another sign of the text’s semantic unity of charm is the allusion to Sophia’s “young knight’s” courteous manners, which adds further elegance to the scene.

Besides natural landscapes, in fact, whose picturesque descriptions are intense and copious in the journal, polished behavior also receives significant attention from the author. Sophia’s portrayals of the Morrells’ guests at La Recompensa, or of neighboring acquaintances—all of whom belong to the colonial élite of which she had no previous experience—never lack observations about nobility or genteel demeanor. But she does condemn affectation or rudeness most severely.

[Fernando de Zayas] has more an air of nobility about him than either of the other brothers - and much more grace - He is decidedly the most enchanting of the five - & this evening

especially. [...] In the course of the evening we got him seated at the piano & he played the most beautiful Waltz I ever heard with exquisite taste & expression & then ‘his own compositions.’ He sits at the piano as one would sit upon an ottoman - leaning back with great ease while his fingers wander over the keys as if of their own will. (June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1834, Badaracco 135)

Fernando de Zayas certainly “dominated Sophia’s emotional horizons in Cuba” (Valenti 85). References to him are numerous and always flattering, but what captivates Sophia in Fernando is above all his aristocratic bearing: his nobility, his grace, his taste, his ease when sitting on the piano stool, as if it were an ottoman arm-chair—in short, his being “superior to all rules of art!”, as she will later write when describing his “ineffable natural grace” (Jan. 3, 1835, Badaracco 529). His cousin Don Andres, too, is an attractive gentleman, whose company is greatly cherished among the local high society, but what Sophia instinctively catches of him is *appearance*. He is noble by cast, talented, intellectually refined, perfectly polished, but none of this information goes beyond mere mimesis. His portrayal carries no connotation of innate distinction; rather, it is the haughtiness she catches in his personality that disappoints Sophia’s expectations to the point where she explicitly disapproves of him:

My curiosity was greatly excited about the elder Don Andres, because Mrs. M[orrell] had said so much about his unrivalled genius and talent, and of his peculiar and distinguished appearance, just one would imagine of a true Castilian, noble, yet withal unprincipled, a refined Epicure. I was not disappointed [...] yet there is an expression in his countenance which makes me distrust him as I would the graceful & beautiful serpent who spoke to Eve. (Apr. 1<sup>st</sup>, Badaracco 71–72)

With all the idiosyncrasies, contradictions, and often obsolete values connected to Cuba, Sophia’s experience of its colonial world had the merit of enriching her New England spirit with new intellectual perspectives. The same eagerness for culture that nurtured the enlightened society in which she moved with her sisters led her to behold aspects of life that she would never have been able to meet within the sterner, but no less aristocratic, milieu of Boston, and which she instead was able to confront in Cuba. Sophia’s *non-travel* guide, *non-travelogue* does not

claim to offer a survey of the island; what it conveys instead is a new perspective from which to observe—and absorb—a different environment and culture. What mostly strikes the reader in her visualization of a Caribbean reality is the innate sense of ease and beauty it possesses—and communicates—notwithstanding the tragic consequences of colonization. Determined to *sketch* her thoughts as they occurred to her spontaneously, and to extend them in absolutely private correspondence only to her mother, Sophia kept herself detached from open comments on social issues, as the tradition of travel writing demanded, letting, instead, opinions emerge through a hermeneutic reading of her text.

With the exception of references here and there to the discomforts of daily life in Cuba,<sup>29</sup> Sophia hardly touches upon issues not pertaining to her own disposition of mind and curiosity. Slavery is one of the most delicate topics she tries to avoid: “I do not allow myself to dwell upon slavery for two reasons. One is, it would certainly counter the beneficent influence, which I have left home and country to court, and another is, that my faith in GOD makes me sure that he makes up to every being the measure of happiness which he loses through the instrumentality of others,” she declares (21, Badaracco 61). Such determination has astonished many critics; not only, in fact, was slavery one of the most tragic plagues of the country—just as it was a keenly debated question at home—but Sophia was directly experiencing its brutality on the plantation, and she could not possibly disregard its consequences.

Sophia’s primary concerns were certainly those of curing herself from the illness that was severely compromising her well-being and of fostering her artistic ambitions, which also responded to her need for inner strength in the face of her weakness. Undoubtedly, such imperative personal needs hindered her from entertaining thoughts about the horrendous condition of the slaves she witnessed on the plantation. Nevertheless, her passive assertion of confidence in Divine Providence as the ultimate recompense for all inequitable sufferings does not do justice to the moral sensibility that can otherwise be perceived throughout the journal. The briskness of the enunciation contradicts the tenor of her writing. Just as her love for nature finds verbal correspondence in the simple truthfulness of pictorial details, rather than in majestic descriptions, or as her keenness for the social life is conveyed by the *irrelevance* of her observations, rather than by commentaries of a

pretentious attitude, so the pathos aroused in her by the sight of the slaves’ dreadful conditions does not find vent in outcries of indignation, but in discreet touches of human compassion. That is not to say that, just as there are occasional commonplace attacks on the Spaniards’ modes of behavior, or in general on the Cubans’ lifestyle, Sophia was never guilty of making offhand remarks on the black population. In her letter of March 10, 1834, opening with one of her detailed reports to her mother about a ride on her beloved horse “Guajamon,” it is almost embarrassing for a reader to acknowledge her astonishment in meeting one field-slave, who, “with an open fine countenance” greeted her, “A Dios’ looking up with a smile” (March 10, Badaracco 48–49), as if slaves were incapable of natural kindness. More often, Sophia just seems to take their presence for granted, appreciating their services, sometimes their grace, without ever betraying deeper feelings for them.

Nevertheless, it is precisely such emotive silence that adds significance to her response to the plague of slavery. A certain bashfulness hovers over her constraint in facing the question, and what is neglected culminates in an inner sense of loss. In one of the few passages in which Sophia lets herself go and openly shows her discomfort about the slaves’ inhumane conditions, we read:

[...] the miserable wretches are badly treated and have no holiday from end of the year to another. Oh such objects as some of them were. It made my heart sick to look at them. One with his fierce eye and brow, and brawny black and blue limbs looked like the very spirit of evil; yet even he was courteous, and when I attempted to get a crust of sugar, moved away the impediments with a promptitude that wrung my heart a great deal more than if he had flung the burning fluid in my face. He looked like the untamable obliged to appear tame, while he was furious with revenge, and if by scalding me he could have given vent to some of his pent up agony, I could have borne it with more equanimity, than I bore that little act of courtesy, which proved he had a soul not yet incapable of gentle movement. (21, Badaracco 61; author’s emphasis)

Her words are as heartfelt as the ones employed in her rapturous depictions of Cuban exotic landscapes, transfiguring the object of the description into an inner state of mind. The image of the slave, at first outlined with incisive strokes of fear and horror, dissolves into a

symbiotic vision of sympathy, where the “he” and the “I” merge into a unity of suffering. What is, indeed, most striking is Sophia’s perception of the sly psychological violence done to slaves, whose “untamable” wrath is forcibly repressed and made “to appear tame,” thus conforming with the mystifications of the white owners, who could thereby justify their brutality by pointing to the slaves’ obsequious behavior.

Not dealing with slavery from a moral standpoint allows Sophia a unique perspective. Owing to her personal reasons for distress, and to her profound wish to overcome its consequences, Sophia certainly limits her observations on this crucial aspect of plantation life in Cuba. Nevertheless, reflections like the one cited above fully demonstrate the intensity of her emotional comprehension of the abhorrent consequences of slavery. Her words, rather than being marked by overt ideological attitudes, convey her sadness, which she extends to her mother with thorough distress.

The “Cuba Journal” forcefully reveals its originality: Sophia is not simply confronting her new environment, but rather she is concerned with acquiring from it broader personal and intellectual understanding. *Vis-à-vis* Cuban plantation society and its multifaceted lifestyle, Sophia seeks a firmer consciousness of her own identity. Her writing, ranging from a romanticization of Cuban landscapes, to an enjoyment of its social modes of behavior, to a distrust of the sad treatment of slaves, never ceases to be an immediate and vivid response to the attractive and curious novelties she encounters in her acquisition of knowledge. Unlike Bryant, whose words ultimately imply intrinsic differences between the North American and the Caribbean worlds, Sophia never feels the “temptation to sit idly,” as if for her, being in Cuba meant facing the challenge of her own New England background and her own personal search for self-realization.

When considered within the vast panorama of travelogues,<sup>30</sup> the “Cuba Journal” does not only differ from the prominent tradition of male writings, which were basically limited by political and economic interests, or by the male ego mastering foreign environments, but it also quite significantly extends the contemporary conventions of women’s travel writing beyond the sphere of feminism and/or femininity. Written as private correspondence to Eliza Peabody, the journal does not respect any convention of self-representation of women, in an attempt to match

the self-confidence of male travelers, nor does Sophia’s sophisticated nature share any issue with the cult of “True Womanhood,” which was also converted into a sign of American superiority. Many writers, such as Julia Ward Howe and Eliza Ripley,<sup>31</sup> confirm the image of the American *proper* woman and the practice of *othering* local inhabitants and events<sup>32</sup> in the accounts of their travels in Cuba. But for Sophia Peabody, a sojourn on the island results in a complex portrait in which she fuses her New England education with equally strong inspirations drawn from Cuban landscapes and life. Her writing is characterized by the *transcendentalist* spirit with which she depicts the liveliness of her daily experiences in Cuba—so *insignificantes*, yet so imbued with the “Spiritual Laws” that Emerson discovered in Nature. “I shall see more in a blade of grass than I ever [-did before] have done,” reads one of her letters (July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1834, Badaracco 234).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>All dates are from Badaracco’s transcription of the “Cuba Journal.” See Badaracco.

<sup>2</sup>Christopher Columbus’s “Journal of the First Voyage to America, 1492–1493” was first published in Madrid in 1825 under the title of *Este es el primer viaje y las derrotas y camino que hizo el Almirante don Cristóbal Colón cuando descubrió las Indias*. It contained transcriptions of the letters and notes he had sent to Fernando II of Aragón and Isabella I of Castile, reporting to them on the expeditions they had supported. Columbus was so enchanted by the fecundity and the luxuriance of the landscapes that his vocabulary seemed too poor to duly represent his discoveries. His writings were therefore full of superlatives and hyperboles, as can be seen from this passage describing his landing on the island of Cuba on October 28, 1492: “The Admiral says that it was exceedingly pleasant to behold the verdure and foliage which presented itself, not to mention the birds in the neighbourhood; the whole offered a scene of such enchantment that it was hardly possible to part from it. He declares this to be the most beautiful island ever seen, abounding in good harbours, and deep rivers [...] The island, he says, is full of pleasant mountains, which are lofty, although not of great extent, the rest of the country is high, after the manner of Sicily....” See Columbus (in *The Heath Anthology* 72).

<sup>3</sup>See Dr. Nathaniel Peabody’s letter to Francis Peabody, of June 6, 1828 (in Marshall 190).