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DONDE HABITE EL OLVIDO: POETRY OF NONBEING

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Luis Cernuda's *Donde habite el olvido* (1934) is poetry of failure, for it without doubt represents the nadir of his career with regard to achieving his poetic ideal: the regaining of a lost innocence wherein reality and desire were one. The vehicle of desire's experiencing the world as eternal present is *eros*, and its successes are ephemeral at best: *el deseo que provoca el amor, la exigencia, dolorosa a fuerza de intensidad, de salir de mí mismo, anegándome en aquel vasto cuerpo de la creación. Y lo que hacía aún más agónico aquel deseo era el reconocimiento tácito de su imposible satisfacción.*¹ We learn from "Historial de un libro" that this work appeared directly after a sordid homosexual affair, and Cernuda himself seemed embarrassed at least by the episode that gave rise to it: *y su relectura me produce rubor y humillación.*² It is a work of alienation, estrangement, and despair in which the breach between reality and desire is greatest. *Total disillusionment; nulled despair; a violently destructive experience; cold despair; and painful nostalgia* are a few of the terms employed by Derek Harris to describe the work in *Luis Cernuda: A Study of the Poetry.*³ Nevertheless, the poems demonstrate a restraint and economy of expression reminiscent of Bécquer (the title itself comes from Rima LXVI).

One of the predominant sensations that these poems communicate is that of emptiness. The poet's existence often is expressed in terms of the void, of nothingness. At times he seems to desire a type of nonbeing wherein all sensation ceases. Several of the poems suggest existential dread, for meaning is given to existence by awareness of its very extinction.

Various critics have noted the existential significance of Cernuda's poetry to a greater or lesser degree. María Dolores Arena points out that the poet's heroic attitude of affirming life in the face of death coincides with the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger.⁴ R. A. Caldwell remarks that Cernuda's concern, *to save what is lasting and essential from the certain wreckage of temporal existence is merged into the modern tradition of phenomenology and existentialism within which the ontologies of Unamuno and Machado grew up.*⁵ And Alexander Coleman speaks of the poet's permanent otherness and refers to his attempts to stem the flow toward nonbeing.⁶

Examining briefly a few of Jean Paul Sartre's ideas concerning ontology as they appear in *L'Être et le néant* should be helpful in gaining a fuller understanding of *Donde habite el olvido*. According to Sartre existence precedes essence, which means that man belongs to no divine scheme of things but rather shows up on the scene by mere chance. He is not fabricated as an object that is first thought and then created. For man there really is no *a priori* whatsoever. Because he is alone in the world, man must make choices; he is doomed to be free, and this is his burden. Human life is free and undetermined, but man needs to categorize and place everything in its proper place. His failure to do this creates the sensation of the absurd. In order to avoid this man will attempt to deny his freedom of choice. Sartre calls this bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). He distinguishes two principal types of being as *being-for-itself* (*pour soi*), and *being-in-itself* (*en soi*). Conscious beings are *being-for-themselves*, and the being of things is *being-in-itself*. Between consciousness and its objects there is a gap, which is nothingness. Therefore, *being-for-themselves* are responsible for bringing nothingness into the world. *Being-in-themselves* are incapable of any relationship. However, man strives to have a pure, concrete, and solid existence such as the objects of his consciousness possess. He, of course, desires this *thingness* without losing his consciousness, a desire reminiscent of the Unamunian conflict of *serse vs serlo todo*. An example is the waiter who adopts the language and gestures that waiters supposedly possess, realizing fully that there is a gap between his "real self" and the waiter. He attempts to incorporate *being-in-itself* (waiter), but there is an abyss, a feeling of void created by the failure. The inherent freedom of consciousness and the inability to incorporate itself into the world create the sensation of anguish and nothing. It should

be noted that during this effort of consciousness to achieve reification, it simultaneously contemplates itself as a thing, for it creates a sort of hole in its being. Man is freedom, and his project is to choose; but freedom is annihilation, for it destroys its own being. Sartre comes to some interesting conclusions concerning man's existence by considering other conscious beings. Due to the Other man feels shame, self-awareness, guilt, and pride. My being observed by others forces me to realize that I am an object for them. Being reified by the Other deprives me of the transcendence that is so important to me: *By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other.*⁷ And yet, the Other is necessary if man is to realize all the structures of his being.⁸

In an epigraph at the beginning of *Donde habite el olvido* Cernuda states that the book is *el recuerdo de un olvido*. Pedro Salinas makes some pertinent comments on this paradoxical phrase and on the work as a whole: *Es decir, puede existir, por paradójico que esto sea, lógicamente, una memoria del olvido. El poeta, al contar desde su más íntimo fondo el olvido, acaso crea así un recuerdo.... Creación allí donde el mismo poeta había afirmado la nada, donde nada parecía existir.*⁹ In a sense *Donde habite el olvido* may be considered a series of meditations on the nature of nonbeing. Many of the poems deal not merely with nothing in the ordinary sense, but with the quiddity of nothingness. The first poem's title is the same as that of the book:

Donde habite el olvido
En los vastos jardines sin aurora;
Donde yo sólo sea

Memoria de una piedra sepultada entre ortigas
Sobre la cual el viento escapa a sus insomnios.

Donde mi nombre deje
Al cuerpo que designa en brazos de los siglos,
Donde el deseo no exista.

En esa gran región donde el amor, ángel terrible,
No esconda como acero
En mi pecho su ala,
Sonriendo lleno de gracia aérea mientras crece el tormento.
Allá donde termine este afán que exige un dueño a imagen suya,
Sometiendo a otra vida su vida,
Sin más horizonte que otros ojos frente a frente.

Donde penas y dichas no sean más que nombres,
 Cielo y tierra nativos en torno de un recuerdo;
 Donde al fin quede libre sin saberlo yo mismo,
 Disuelto en niebla, ausencia,
 Ausencia leve como carne de niño.
 Allá, allá lejos;
 Donde habite el olvido.¹⁰

The poem is a series of adverbial clauses that constitute a chain of incomplete sentences. There is a sense of emptiness as the reader is left alone waiting for the independent clauses that never appear. The poet has suffered love's torment and now wishes to abolish his own self in nothingness, oblivion's realm, in order to avoid all sensation. *Donde yo sólo sea / Memoria de una piedra sepultada entre ortigas* suggests that the poet desires to abandon itself in the *en soi* of thingness (*pedra*), but not in order to gain any substantiality or eternity; rather, it wishes to annihilate consciousness, as it only produces pain and torment for the poet.

The poet in his effort to dissolve himself into nothingness seeks to destroy the relationship of sign and referent: *Donde mi nombre deje / Al cuerpo... / Donde penas y dichas no sean más que nombres*. If the poet's body and feelings could be mere names, then they would be insentient shells detached from their respective real objects.

In the fourth stanza reference is made to the Other which was the lover who along with the poet was responsible for this disastrous amorous relationship and its concomitant shame. Sartre says that one can, when confronted by the Other, adopt either an attitude of submission to or of dominance over it. However, he also states that either choice involves failure. In any event, the poet merely wishes to suppress the desire in order to avoid suffering.

At the end of the fifth stanza he refers again to the state of nonbeing he wishes to attain. Upon achieving it there will be no knowledge of it (*sin saberlo yo mismo*), because consciousness will have been obliterated. He will be dissolved into mist and pure absence. Curiously, however, Cernuda ends the stanza with a slightly erotic simile: *Ausencia leve como carne de niño*.

From an ontological perspective the poem can be seen as the poet's desire to annihilate his very being in an attempt to gain a state of nonbeing wherein all suffering will cease to exist. It is a world of absences but a world nonetheless; and although the poet does not heroically face reality with an awareness of life's intrinsic absurdity, neither does he choose suicide or simply to avoid the problem of existence (*mauvaise foi*).

Poem III, "Esperé un dios en mis días," is made up of three quatrains and a couplet. In the first quatrain the poet tells of how love destroyed his desire, and in the second two describes his present situation:

Esperé un dios en mis días
 Para crear mi vida a su imagen,
 Mas el amor, como un agua
 Arrastra afanes al paso.

Me he olvidado a mí mismo en sus ondas;
 Vacío el cuerpo, doy contra las luces;
 Vivo y no vivo, muerto y no muerto;
 Ni tierra ni cielo, ni cuerpo ni espíritu.

Soy eco de algo;
 Lo estrechan mis brazos siendo aire,
 Lo miran mis ojos siendo sombra,
 Lo besan mis labios siendo sueño.

He amado, ya no amo más;
 He reído, tampoco río (pp. 88-89).

Here the poet exists in an ontological limbo; he is neither alive nor dead, neither earth nor sky, neither body nor spirit. He is neither *pour soi* nor *en soi*, and Sartre says that when consciousness is unable to incorporate *en soi* the sensation of nausea arises. The poet is existentially alienated; for he is, as he states in the first verse of the third stanza, an *eco de algo*. This image suggests an emptiness that represents the essence of his being. An echo is heard at a distance and lacks substance, for it is merely the name of a thing in the process of fading into nothingness. He cannot even specify of what he is an echo thus intensifying the nullity of his existence. Nor do air, shadow, and dream constitute his essence; and any attempt to know it by means of his arms, eyes or lips, will necessarily fail.

Poem V expresses the poet's desire to die, and at the end of the first stanza he states that he hopes to be *hecho aire que pasa y no sabe* (p. 90). In this instance air is insubstantiality itself and hence cannot be related to *en soi*, for concreteness pertains to the latter, and here we have its absence. *No sabe* means no consciousness or being. The three lines describe in somewhat more detail this state of nonbeing: *A vivir sin mí mismo de un deseo, / Sin despertar, sin acordarme / Allá en la luna perdido entre su frío* (p. 90). Again the poet's self is disintegrated, and somehow he exists without himself. In other words the destructive experience of a failed love has destroyed his true self, and he now desires a nonexistence which he will neither remember nor from which will awaken. Perhaps "metanihilistic" might serve to describe this ontological realm, for it is a state of nonbeing that somehow exists beyond extinction. The last verse with reference to the moon is reminiscent of the poetry of Bécquer as well

as of the early poetry of Juan Ramón Jiménez, with its languid, romantic sentimentality.

"Era un sueño, aire" is a brief poem that combines a series of disparate elements in order to create a sense of loss and disintegration:

Era un sueño, aire
Tranquilo en la nada;
Al abrir los ojos
Las ramas perdían

Exhalaba el tiempo
Luces vegetales,
Amores caldos,
Tristezas sin dónde.

Volví sombra;
Agua eran sus labios.
Cristal, soledades,
La frente, la lámpara.

Pasión sin figura,
Pena sin historia;
Como herida al pecho,
Un beso, el deseo.

No sabes, no sabes (pp. 92-93).

Unlike the previous poem nearly all emotion is absent here, and we are presented a dispassionate description of a world which is a reflection of the poet's present emotive state (the objective correlative of which Cernuda speaks in his commentaries). It is a poem of absences. There is no object of the verb *perdían* in verse 4, for example. *Tristezas sin dónde*, *Pasión sin figura*, and *Pena sin historia*, intensify the sensation of incompleteness. *Agua eran sus labios* suggests a lack of any concrete form in the world. All is absence, vagueness, and nullity. With the last two lines of the third stanza we have four isolated elements that at first appear to be correlatives of previous objects. However, they have no logical referent and consequently simply stand alone helping to create a sensation of forlornness. Only the last two lines in the fourth quatrain suggest the passionate episode that gave rise to this world of the void. With *No sabes, no sabes*, it is evident that the poem does not possess an altogether logical explanation, but is rather the expression of Cernuda's own numb despair which arose as a consequence of his failed love. This poem along with No.1, is perhaps one of Cernuda's finest achievements in capturing the world of nonbeing wherein nearly all concrete elements of reality are absent despite the fact that it is precisely those objects (*rama, labios*, etc.) that help to create ontological nullity — the poem's theme. Considered from an

ontological perspective, the much noted ethereal or incorporeal quality of Cernuda's poetry assumes a new and important dimension.

In Poem XII, "No quiero, triste espíritu, volver" the poet claims that he has no desire to return to love even if there may have been a moment of happiness. The rest was torment, and in the fourth and final stanza he states: *No, no quisiera volver, / Sino morir aún más, / Arrancar una sombra, / Olvidar un olvido* (p. 94). Again Cernuda expresses a desire for an existence that is beyond death, an extinction so total that it destroys oblivion itself. All thingness, even that of death and oblivion, must disappear, in order that the poet may "de-create" a world of nonbeing where all "not is" or "nothings." Only in this way will the poet be able to escape not only pain and sorrow but sensation altogether.

In Poem XIII, "No es el amor quien muere," the immutability of love itself is contrasted to the destructiveness of the "reality" of human love:

No es el amor quien muere,
Somos nosotros mismos.

Inocencia primera
Abolida en deseo,
Olvido de sí mismo en otro olvido,
Ramas entrelazadas,
¿Por qué vivir si desaparecéis un día?

Sólo vive quien mira
Siempre ante sí los ojos de su aurora,
Sólo vive quien besa
Aquel cuerpo de ángel que el amor levantara.

Fantasmas de la pena,
A lo lejos, los otros,
Los que ese amor perdieron,
Como un recuerdo en sueños,
Recorriendo las tumbas
Otro vacío estrechan.

Por allá van y gimen,
Muertos en pie, vidas tras de la piedra,
Golpeando impotencia,
Arañando la sombra
Con inútil ternura.

No, no es el amor quien muere (p. 95).

With *Olvido de sí mismo en otro olvido* the poet suggests that loving involves the surrendering of oneself to another which means certain destruction. With regard to this concept Octavio Paz states the following:

Por el amor, el deseo toca al fin la realidad: el otro existe. Esta revelación casi siempre es dolorosa porque la existencia del Otro se nos presenta como un cuerpo que se penetra y como una conciencia impenetrable ... el deseo aspira a consumarse mediante la destrucción del objeto deseado: el amor descubre que ese objeto es indestructible ... e insustituible. Queda el deseo sin amor o el amor sin deseo.¹¹

Sartre says that as one perceives oneself as an object of the Other, freedom is lost: *strictly speaking, it is not that I perceive myself losing my freedom in order to become a thing, but my nature — over there, outside my lived freedom — as a given attribute of this being which I am for the Other.*¹² And, of course, the same process takes place in the Other with regard to me. Hence: *Olvidando de sí mismo en otro olvido.* In the third stanza the poet admits that genuine existence can only be experienced by means of love. But in the last two he again returns to the existential void inhabited by those who have lost love. Here the lost souls embrace oblivion in a despair which reveals the poet's anguish caused by a failed love.

"No hace al muerto la herida" compares love's attributes to the blows of an ax, stabs of knives, and stings of scorpions and concludes in the final stanza:

No creas nunca, no creas sino en la muerte de todo;
Contempla bien ese tronco que muere,

Hecho el muerto más muerto,
Con tus ojos, como tus deseos, como tu amor;
Ruina y miseria que un día se anegan en inmenso olvido,
Dejando, burla suprema, una fecha vacía,
Huella inútil que la luz deserta (p. 99).

It is noteworthy that the poet here is addressing someone — apparently himself. Alexander Coleman states that *La realidad y el deseo* is really about the process by which Cernuda gains union with the Other, and that in *Donde habite el olvido* the first signals of this lifelong endeavor may be observed.¹³ Coleman refers to the Other in the sense of a divided self and not as another individual "out there." This would suggest that the problem of the ontological schism may one day be resolved. However, this poem seems clearly nihilistic and is reminiscent of Góngora's "Mientras por competir con tu cabello," for Cernuda states that eyes, desires, and love itself will be *Ruina y miseria que un día se anegan en inmenso olvido*, just as feminine physical beauty will become *polvo* and *nada* in the Baroque sonnet. The last two verses reinforce the sensation of emptiness and absolute nothingness. The *fecha vacía* suggests that time will come to an

end, and *la luz deserta* signifies that a gradual and all-encompassing darkness will obliterate all existence.

In *Donde habite el olvido* Luis Cernuda becomes acutely aware of an existential void due to his failed love. At times he shows what Phillip Silver has called *envidia ontológica de la naturaleza* wherein the *being-for-itself* wishes to incorporate *being-in-itself*, not to gain the substantiality of the *en soi*, but rather to annihilate all sensation of the *pour soi*.¹⁴ It was the presence of the Other and the failed relationship with him that gave rise to shame and guilt as well as to dread of nothingness. The poet now realizes that nothingness, which formulates itself principally around *olvido* and *olvido de un olvido*, constitutes an essential part of his poetic self. Cernuda had always eschewed bad faith and inauthentic existence and wrote some of Spain's most acerbic poetry against the bourgeois, even against his own one-time mentor Pedro Salinas. María Dolores Arana affirms that Cernuda, with a complete awareness of death feels the impulse to *elegir la forma heroica de vida*, and to continue to strive to unite *deseo* with *realidad*, knowing full well that success may well be impossible.¹⁵ Although *Donde habite el olvido* hardly presents a heroic stance towards life, it does represent the beginnings of Cernuda's existential awareness and some of his philosophically most important poetry. And although this work portrays a world devoid of sensation and being it is precisely this poetry of nonbeing which provides some examples of the finest poetry of *La realidad y el deseo* as well as of modern Spain.

NOTES

1 Luis Cernuda, *Poesía y literatura* (Barcelona-México: Seix Barral, 1960), p. 196.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 251.

3 Derek Harris, *Luis Cernuda: A Study of the Poetry* (London: Tamesis, 1973), pp. 53-61.

4 María Dolores Arana, "Sobre Luis Cernuda," in *Papeles de Son Armadans*, 39 (1965), 311-28; rpt. in *Luis Cernuda*.

5 R. A. Caldwell, "The Persistence of Romantic Thought in Spain," in *Modern Language Review*, 65 (1970), 811.

6 Alexander Coleman, *Other Voices: A Study of the Late Poetry of Luis Cernuda* (Chapel Hill: U. North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 81, 1969), pp. 15-25.

7 Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: The Citadel Press, 1965), p. 198.

8 The following works were consulted: Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957); Muncie Natanson, *A Critique of Jean Paul Sartre's Ontology* (New York: Haskell House, 1977); Mary Warnock, *Ethics Since 1900* (Oxford and New York: Oxford U.P., 1969).

9 Pedro Salinas, *Literatura española, Siglo XX* (México: Antigua Librería Robredo, 1949), p. 226; rpt. *Luis Cernuda*, p. 38.

10 Cernuda, *La realidad y el deseo*. 4th. ed. (México: Tezontle, 1964), p. 87.

11 Octavio Paz, "La palabra edificante," in *Papeles de Son Armadans*, 35, 103 (1964), 66-67; rpt. in *Luis Cernuda*, p. 153.

12 Sartre, *Being and Nothing*, p. 239.

13 Coleman, p. 153.

14 Silver, "Cernuda, poeta ontológico," in *Luis Cernuda*, p. 210.

15 Arana, p. 177.