

Writers working under wretched conditions: Luis Cernuda and the Spanish canon

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With the possible exception of Antonio Machado and Federico García Lorca, Luis Cernuda is the twentieth-century Spanish poet who has attracted most critical attention. The young man from Seville who was upset by the lukewarm reception of his first book of poems, *Perfil del aire*, in 1927; the virtually unknown Republican exile who came to Britain in 1938, aged 35, without a penny to his name and without any knowledge of English, was to become — after his death in 1963 — one of the most revered Spanish poets of all times. In modern Spanish poetry there is Machado, Lorca and Cernuda, and then there is everyone else.

Cernuda's unassailable position in the canon can hardly be disputed by those who have been exposed to the unrestrained anger, the verbal prowess and the celebration of homosexual desire that characterize his surrealist poems of the late 1920s and early 1930s; or to the more reflective voice that emerges in his exilic poetry, once he had absorbed the lessons of Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson on the use of the dramatic monologue; or to his 'Poemas para un cuerpo', the series of love poems which he wrote late in his rather short life, after falling in love with a young Mexican man, a doomed affair for the sake of which he would give up a comfortable life in the United States, the only decent job he ever had, and the financial security that went with it.

Even though much has been written on Cernuda's work, including his views on the Spanish canon, the aim of my lecture is to throw new light on these views or,

to be precise, on the canonizing operations that Cernuda performs in, and through, some of his poems and critical studies.

In the early 1970s, Derek Harris argued that *La realidad y el deseo* — *Reality and Desire*, the title of Cernuda's collected poetry in verse — 'is the account of a persistent search for an ideal existence of perfect unity between self and world, between the conflicting subjective and objective dimensions of life', the account of someone who 'experienced a profound sense of alienation in the society in which he lived' (1973, 2). This sense of alienation can be gleaned from 'Historial de un libro' [History of a Book], one of the very few autobiographical texts written by Cernuda. He used it as an introduction to the 1958 edition of *La realidad y el deseo* and it has been mined to exhaustion by critics of all persuasions. In it, Cernuda explains how his sense of alienation found a powerful echo in the early work of the French surrealists:

Leyendo aquellos libros primeros de Aragon, de Breton, de Éluard, de Crevel, percibía cómo eran míos también el malestar y osadía que en dichos libros hallaban voz. Un mozo solo, sin ninguno de los apoyos que, gracias a la fortuna y a las relaciones, dispensa la sociedad a tantos, no podía menos de sentir hostilidad hacia esa sociedad en medio de la cual vivía como extraño. Otro motivo de desacuerdo, aún más hondo, existía en mí; pero ahí prefiero no entrar ahora.

[When reading those first books by Aragon, Breton, Éluard, Crevel, I felt how their discontent and daring were my own. A young man alone, without the support that society provides for many through money and connections, had no alternative but to feel hostile towards that society in which he lived as an alien. There was another, more intimate, cause for disagreement [between me and Spanish society], but I prefer not to go into that now.] (1994, vol. 2, 632)¹

¹ All translations from Cernuda (1993) and (1994) are my own.

Loneliness and solitude are recurrent themes in Cernuda's work and they appear in some of his most memorable poems. In 'Telarañas cuelgan de la razón' [The Mind Is Hung with Cobwebs], for example, the poetic subject draws the inner landscape of devastation caused by unfulfilled love or desire (in Cernuda's poetry, love and desire amount to the same thing) in the following terms:

Telarañas cuelgan de la razón

Telarañas cuelgan de la razón
En un paisaje de ceniza absorta;
Ha pasado el huracán de amor,
Ya ningún pájaro queda.

Tampoco ninguna hoja,
Todas van lejos, como gotas de agua
De un mar cuando se seca,
Cuando no hay ya lágrimas bastantes,
Porque alguien, cruel como un día de sol en primavera,
Con su sola presencia ha dividido en dos un cuerpo.

Ahora hace falta recoger los trozos de prudencia,
Aunque siempre nos falte alguno;
Recoger la vida vacía
Y caminar esperando que lentamente se llene,
Si es posible, otra vez, como antes,
De sueños desconocidos y deseos invisibles.

Tú nada sabes de ello,
Tú estás allá, cruel como el día;
El día, esa luz que abraza estrechamente un triste muro,
Un muro, ¿no comprendes?,
Un muro frente al cual estoy solo.

[The Mind is Hung with Cobwebs

The mind is hung with cobwebs
In a landscape of astonished ash;
Love's hurricane has passed overhead:
Not a bird left.

Nor a leaf.
They disappear like drops of water
When an ocean goes dry.
When tears are not enough
Because as cruel as a spring day of sun someone
Splits a body in two with his mere presence.

Now we need to gather up the pieces of prudence,
Though one of them is always missing,
To collect this empty life
And go along hoping it will slowly fill up
If possible, again, as before
With unrecognized dreams and invisible desires.

Oh you know nothing of this,
You are over there, as cruel as the day,
The day, the light that tightly holds some sorrowful wall.
A wall – can't you understand?
A wall I face alone.] (Cernuda, 1999, 46-47)

Octavio Paz observes that there is a consensus about Cernuda being a love poet, and he claims that 1) all Cernuda's other themes ('solitude, boredom, exaltation of the natural world, contemplation of the works of men...') spring from the theme love, and 2) Cernuda only knew and spoke of homosexual love (Paz 1999, xxiv). There is no question that Cernuda is a love poet and that he only speaks of homosexual love. Do all his other themes spring from love, though? I don't think they do.

Loneliness brought about by unfulfilled desire as represented in 'Telarañas cuelgan de la razón' and other poems contrasts sharply with the pleasant solitude addressed to by the poetic subject in 'Soliloquio del farero' [Soliloquy of the Lighthouse Keeper], a poem from *Invocaciones* [Invocations] (1934-1935) in which the lighthouse keeper asks himself and his loneliness: '¿Cómo llenarte, soledad,/ sino contigo misma?' [How to fill you, solitude,/ Except with yourself?'] (1993, vol. 1, 223), or the solitude that gives this prose poem from *Ocnos* (1942, 1949, 1963) its title:

La soledad

La soledad está en todo para ti, y todo para ti está en la soledad. Isla feliz adonde tantas veces te acogiste, compenetrado mejor con la vida y con sus designios, trayendo allá, como quien trae del mercado unas flores cuyos pétalos luego abrirán en plenitud recatada, la turbulencia que poco a poco ha de sedimentar las imágenes, las ideas.

Hay quienes en medio de la vida la perciben apresuradamente, y son los improvisadores; pero hay también quienes necesitan distanciarse de ella para verla más y mejor, y son los contempladores. El presente es demasiado brusco, no pocas veces lleno de incongruencia irónica, y conviene distanciarse de él para comprender su sorpresa y su reiteración.

Entre los otros y tú, entre el amor y tú, entre la vida y tú, está la soledad. Mas esa soledad, que de todo te separa, no te apena. ¿Por qué habría de apenarte? Cuenta hecha con todo, con la tierra, con la tradición, con los hombres, a ninguno debes tanto como a la soledad. Poco o mucho, lo que tú seas, a ella se lo debes.

De niño, cuando a la noche veías el cielo, cuyas estrellas semejaban miradas amigas llenando la oscuridad de misteriosa simpatía, la vastedad de los espacios no te arredraba, sino al contrario, te suspendía en embeleso confiado. Allá entre las constelaciones brillaba la tuya, clara como el agua, luciente como el carbón que es el diamante: la constelación de la soledad, invisible para tantos, evidente y benéfica para algunos, entre los cuales has tenido la suerte de contarte. (1993, vol. 1, 604)

[Solitude

Solitude for you resides in everything, and everything for you resides in solitude. That happy island where so often you took refuge, entering more fully into life and its designs, bringing there, as one brings home from the market a bunch of flowers whose petals then unfold in shy exuberance, the turbulence that gradually would deposit its sediment of images and ideas.

There are those who in the midst of life gather it up in a rush, and they are the improvisers; but there are also those who need to distance themselves in order to see it better, and they are the contemplatives. The present is too rough and sudden, often enough full of ironic dissonance, and it makes sense to step back and find the perspective to understand its surprises and repetitions.

Between others and you, between love and you, between life and you, lies solitude. But that solitude, which separates you from everything, doesn't sadden you. Why would it sadden you? When you settle accounts with everything, with the earth, with tradition, with people, you owe none as much as you owe to solitude. A little or a lot, whatever you are, you owe it to her.

As a child, looking at the sky at night, whose stars resembled visible friends filling the dark with mysterious sympathy, the vastness of space didn't frighten you, on the contrary, it held you in a trusting fascination. There among the constellations shone yours, clear as water, brilliant as coal compressed into diamonds: the constellation of solitude, invisible to so many, evident and beneficent for some, among whom you've had the luck to count yourself.] (Cernuda 2004, 82)

Loneliness befalls the young poet without social connections and the lover whose body has been split in two by the presence of a desired one. Solitude is the 'happy island' of those who step back from life so that they can make sense of it, the place where 'the contemplatives' take refuge; a 'constellation' that is 'invisible to many', 'evident and beneficent for some', a small minority, the happy few.

A quick glance at *La realidad y el deseo* and Cernuda's work as literary critic yields solid evidence of the high esteem in which he held poetry and the figure of the poet. In the 'Observaciones preliminares' [Preliminary Observations] that open his *Estudios sobre poesía española contemporánea* [Essays on Contemporary Spanish Poetry] (1957), he points out that the poet is not a 'criatura inefable que vive en las nubes' [ineffable being with his head in the clouds] and refers to him as 'el hombre que acaso esté en contacto más íntimo con la realidad circundante' [the man who is arguably in closest contact with the surrounding reality] (1994, vol. 2, 74). He also points out that we have 'afinidades y desacuerdos' [affinities as well as disagreements] (1994, vol. 2, 75) with the poets from the past, and that the relationship between the poets of any given time and their future readership is a fluctuating one, thereby implicitly recognising what Barbara Herrnstein Smith deems 'the most fundamental character of literary value, which is its mutability and diversity' (1983, 10). In Cernuda's view, contemporaneity can be conceived of in two different ways: *sensu lato*, in which case 16th-century Spanish poet Garcilaso de la Vega, for example, would be our contemporary, and *sensu stricto*, that is, in purely chronological terms, although being 'on earth while [we are] alive', to use W.H. Auden's definition of the term (1962, 12), does not necessarily turn a poet into our

contemporary. In order to qualify as such, the poet who is on earth while we are alive must do two things: he must apprehend his age and he must express it appropriately. If he can't or won't, he will never be our contemporary.

Cernuda has a handful of texts in which he advocates the contemporaneity *sensu lato* of Spanish poets from the past as well as that of some poets who were alive in his day. In his work, 'contemporary' is virtually a synonym of 'canonical' and these texts insert themselves into the network of 20th-century discourses that construct the Spanish canon. Here it may be worth bearing in mind that, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith puts it, 'the value of a literary work is continuously produced and re-produced by the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation that are frequently invoked as "reflecting" its value and therefore as being evidence of it' (1983, 30).

I will now turn my attention to the friction identified by Cernuda between the Spanish poets whose canonicity he advocates, and the society in which they lived and worked, a friction that manifests itself in society's indifference, even hostility, towards those poets, and the fact that, for them, solitude was a 'happy island'. We are, therefore, into Romantic territory, and it is my contention that such friction between poet and society can be interpreted in the light of the concept of 'genius' as defined by Arthur Schopenhauer in the 'Supplements to the Third Book' of *The World as Will and Representation* (1819, 1844, 1859).² To prove my point, I will comment briefly on several passages from five poems included in *La realidad y el deseo* — 'La gloria del poeta' [The Poet's Glory], from *Invocaciones* (1934-35); 'A un

² It might also be interpreted from a non-romantic perspective, through the prism of Ortega's Nietzschean conceptualization of 'society' in *España invertebrada* [Invertebrate Spain] (1921), but today I will leave that aside.

poeta muerto (F.G.L.)' [To a Dead Poet (F.G.L.)] and 'A Larra con unas violetas' [To Larra, with Violets], from *Las nubes* [The Clouds] (1937-40); 'Góngora' and 'A un poeta futuro' [To a Future Poet], from *Como quien espera el alba* [As One Awaiting Dawn] (1941-44) — and I will rely on the chapters devoted to Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and Vicente Aleixandre in *Estudios sobre poesía española contemporánea*.

According to Cernuda, the poets who deserve a prominent place in the Spanish canon are: Jorge Manrique, Garcilaso, San Juan de la Cruz, Fray Luis de León, Góngora, Cervantes, Aldana, Bécquer and, among his contemporaries *sensu stricto*, Aleixandre, Manuel Altolaguirre, Lorca and, before Cernuda fell out with him, Juan Ramón Jiménez. The list of prose writers is even shorter: Cervantes again, Mariano José de Larra, and Benito Pérez Galdós.

In 'La gloria del poeta', the poet addresses a pitiless demon who is poking fun at 'mi cansancio de la tierra' [my weariness of this earth] (1999, 62-63). He is puzzled by the demon's attitude as both of them, the demon and the poet, are 'chispas de un mismo fuego' [sparks of the same flame] and have been thrown by 'un mismo soplo [...] sobre las ondas tenebrosas/ De una extraña creación [...]' [the same breath [...] over the dark waves/ Of a strange creation ...] populated by men destined to die (1999, 62-63). The poet reminds the demon that they are after the same things, among which 'hermosos versos que arrojar al desdén de los hombres' [lovely verses to scatter to the disdain of men] (1999, 62-63). The poet feels utter contempt for these men:

Los hombres tú los conoces, hermano mío;
Mírales cómo enderezan su invisible corona
Mientras se borran en la sombra con sus mujeres al brazo,

Carga de suficiencia inconsciente,
Llevando a comedita distancia del pecho,
Como sacerdotes católicos la forma de su triste dios,
Los hijos conseguidos en unos minutos que se hurtaron al sueño
Para dedicarlos a la cohabitación, en la densa tiniebla conyugal
De sus cubiles, escalonados los unos sobre los otros.

[...]

Oye sus marmóreos preceptos
Sobre lo útil, lo normal y lo hermoso;
Óyeles dictar la ley al mundo, acotar el amor, dar canon a la belleza
 inexpresable,
Mientras deleitan sus sentidos con altavoces delirantes;
Contempla sus extraños cerebros
Intentando levantar, hijo a hijo, un complicado edificio de arena
Que negase con torva frente lívida la refulgente paz de las estrellas.

Ésos son, hermano mío,
Los seres con quienes muero a solas,
Fantasmas que harán brotar un día
El solemne erudito, oráculo de estas palabras mías ante alumnos extraños,
Obteniendo por ello renombre,
Más una pequeña casa en la angustiosa sierra inmediata a la capital;
[...]

[Ah you know men well, my brother –
See how they straighten their invisible crowns
As they fade into the shadows
With their wives on their arms
(Freight of unconscious sufficiency!)
And see how they carry –
At a proper arm's length,
As Catholic priests carry the figure of their dreary god –
The children gotten in the few minutes
Stolen from sleep and dedicated to intercourse
In the deep conjugal darkness
Of their lairs, clambering on top of one another.

[...]

Listen to their marmoreal precepts
On the useful, the normal, the beautiful;
Listen to them dictate law to the world, fix the norms
 of love, give rules for ineffable beauty,

While their delight their senses with delirious loudspeakers;
Contemplate their strange minds,
Attempting to raise, son by son, a complex edifice of sand
Whose grim, livid facade would negate the refulgent peace of the stars.

These, my brother,
Surround my solitary dying –
Specters that someday will spawn
The solemn scholar, the oracle
Who will display my words for alien students,
And therewith gaining renown,
Get a little country place in the tortuous mountains
Near the capital.
...] (1999, 64-67)

As the demon is looking at 'Esta sucia tierra donde el poeta se ahoga' [This filthy earth where the poet slowly suffocates], the poet's identity blends with that of his brother – 'mi voz es la tuya', 'mi amor es el tuyo' [my voice is yours,/ And my love] – and begs him for one long night of love (1999, 66-69). The poet admits to being tired of 'la vana tarea de las palabras' [[t]his useless work of words] (1999, 68-69), he believes that it is time for him to die, and he urges the demon to be instrumental in his death, which is supposed to be a liberating experience.

At the beginning of 'A un poeta muerto (F.G.L.)', the poetic subject opposes Lorca's brilliance – 'El fresco y alto ornato de la vida' [proud new ornament of life] – to 'un pueblo hosco y duro' [a hard and sullen people], and he lets it be known that Lorca was assassinated because of his exemplary qualities as a human being: 'Por esto te mataron, porque eras/ Verdor en nuestra tierra árida/ Y azul en nuestro oscuro aire' [For this they killed you;/ You were the green in our barren land,/ And the blue in our dark air] (1999, 74-75). In the second stanza, the poetic subject reflects

on the violence that over the centuries has been inflicted on exceptional individuals
by the Spanish people, a violence that makes the poets' task very difficult:

Leve es la parte de la vida
Que como dioses rescatan los poetas.
El odio y destrucción perduran siempre
Sordamente en la entraña
Toda hiel sempiterna del español terrible,
Que acecha lo cimero
Con su piedra en la mano.

[It is only a fragment of life
That poets can ransom like gods.
Mute hatred and destruction always survive
In the perennially
Bilious guts of the terrible Spaniard
Who lies in wait for what is glorious
With a stone in his hand.] (1999, 74-75)

The following stanza highlights the distance that separates the gifted poet from the
ignorant Spanish people:

Triste sino nacer
Con algún don ilustre
Aquí, donde los hombres
En su miseria sólo saben
El insulto, la mofa, el recelo profundo
Ante aquel que ilumina las palabras opacas
Por el oculto fuego originario.

[Here, to be born with a gift
Is misfortune;
Here men in their misery
Know only
Insults, scorn, and deep suspicion
Of anyone who illuminates opaque words
With the original, occult fire.] (1999, 74-75)

The theme of violence is taken up again in the eighth stanza. Here violence is no longer that of 'the terrible Spaniard', but of the world at large:

Pero antes no sabías
La realidad más honda de este mundo:
El odio, el triste odio de los hombres,
Que en ti señalar quiso
Por el acero horrible su victoria,
Con tu angustia postrera
Bajo la luz tranquila de Granada,
Distante entre cipreses y laureles,
Y entre tus propias gentes
Y por las mismas manos
Que un día servilmente te halagaran.

[But, in those days, you did not know
The most profound reality of this world:
Hatred, this miserable hatred among men
That had to prove its victory
In you, with its horrible blade,
With your final anguish
In the tranquil light of Granada,
Far off, among cypresses and laurels,
Among your own people
And by the same hands
That once offered you servile praise.] (1999, 78-79)

The poem ends with another reference to death understood as a form of liberation for the poet.

As is well known, Larra, the 19th-century prose writer regarded by literary historians as one of the leading lights of Spanish Romanticism, took his own life in 1837, when he was only 27 years old. Larra's decision to commit suicide seems to have been caused by his disenchantment with Spanish politics and the state in which the country found itself at the time, as well as his love life. In 'A Larra con unas violetas', Larra's death is reimagined as having a soothing effect: 'Si la muerte

apacigua/ Tu boca amarga de Dios insatisfecha,/ [...] / En esa paz que bajo tierra te esperaba,/ [...] / El fiel y último encanto de estar solo' [If death soothes/ Your bitter mouth, thirsty for God/ [...] / In the peace that was waiting for you underground, [...] / The last, loyal charm of being on your own] (1993, vol. 1, 266). Death is the final remedy against the sickness of life, as being alive entails sharing the earth with greedy men trapped in sordid marriages, their 'venenosa opinión pública' [venomous public opinion] and their bloody revolutions (1993, vol. 1, 267). Not surprisingly: 'No hay sitio en ella para el hombre solo,/ Hijo desnudo y deslumbrante del divino pensamiento' [There is no place in it for the lone man,/ the naked, dazzling son of a divine idea] (1993, vol. 1, 267). Larra's kingdom, like that of Christ and, by extension, any talented writer, is not of this world. In 'A Larra con unas violetas', Spain is identified as 'nuestra gran madrastra' ['our great stepmother'] (1993, vol. 1, 267), the first reference in Cernuda's poetry to a Spain riven by civil war, a Spain where writing is not tantamount to crying, as Larra had bitterly complained in the 19th-century, but to dying.³

Góngora is portrayed, in the poem of the same title, as 'envejecido' [an aged man] and as poet whose word is 'lúcida [...] como diamante' [as lucid as a diamond] (1993, vol. 1, 330). Unlike the poetic subject in 'La gloria del poeta', he is not tired of the 'useless work of words', but of currying favour with powerful men in Madrid

³ In 'Las horas de invierno', an article published on 25 December 1836, Larra spoke of his isolation as a writer based in Madrid: 'Escribir en Madrid es llorar, es buscar voz sin encontrarla, como en una pesadilla abrumadora y violenta' [To write in Madrid is tantamount to crying, to searching for a voice without finding it, as if it were an overwhelming, violent nightmare] (www.cervantesvirtual.com). In 'A Larra con unas violetas', Cernuda goes even further: 'Escribir en España no es llorar, es morir./ Porque muere la inspiración envuelta en humo./ Cuando no va su llama libre en pos del aire' [To write in Spain is not tantamount to crying, but to dying./ Because inspiration wrapped up in smoke dies./ When its free flame does not go up towards the air] (1993, vol. 1, 267).

and humiliating himself before them, hence he goes back to Córdoba, his home town, 'para morir tranquilo y silencioso' [to die peacefully and quietly], roughly the same end that a nameless soldier in Hernán Cortés's army looks forward to in 'Quetzatcóatl', from *Como quien espera el alba*, one of Cernuda's most successful dramatic monologues. In Córdoba, Góngora takes refuge in solitude, gives up expecting favours from anyone and severs his ties with pompous royalty and members of the aristocracy, whose stupidity persuades the poetic subject to place them at the same level as the uneducated people. Despite turning his back to the world, Góngora will not be spared the harsh criticism of ignorant men who have it in their power to bestow literary fame. After his death, he will be accused of loving 'lo oscuro' (Góngora's poems are often judged to be *obscure*) (1993, vol. 1, 332), and he will be denied his status as writer. However, his life as an exemplary poet marginalised by the powerful and held in contempt by ignoramuses; his unwillingness to compromise; his free and proud existence based on an unwavering devotion to poetry and which resonates with Nietzsche's aristocratic moral values, prompt the poetic subject to celebrate him and his work in the face of the contempt shown him by his contemporaries as well as those critics who saw fit to blacken his memory:

Viva pues Góngora, puesto que así los otros
Con desdén le ignoraron, menosprecio
Tras del cual aparece su palabra encendida
Como estrella perdida en lo hondo de la noche,
Como metal insomne en las entrañas de la tierra.
Ventaja grande es que esté ya muerto
Y que de muerto cumpla los tres siglos, que así pueden
Los descendientes mismos de quienes le insultaban
Inclinarse a su nombre, dar premio al erudito,

Sucesor del gusano, royendo su memoria.

[Long live Góngora, then, since he was ignored
By others behind whose disdain
His burning word rises
Like a lost star in the dead of night,
Like sleepless metal deep within the earth.
What a great advantage that he should be dead,
That he should have been dead for over three centuries,
So that the descendants of those who once insulted him
Can now bow to his name, reward the scholar,
Who has replaced the worm in gnawing away at his memory.] (1993, vol. 1, 332)

To Cernuda's Góngora, as to Larra, death offers liberation; it is the gateway towards a tranquillity that he could never have achieved in his lifetime. The poem ends by presenting him as 'Nulo al fin, ya tranquilo, entre su nada' [Dust at last, already in peace, in his nothingness] (1993, vol. 1, 332).

It would be difficult to dissociate the poetic subject in 'A un poeta futuro', who happens to be a poet, from Cernuda himself. In keeping with the latter's approach to poetry and life in general, this poetic subject does not mind being unknown 'En medio de estos cuerpos casi contemporáneos,/ Vivos de modo diferente al de mi cuerpo' [Among these almost contemporary bodies/ Which are alive in a different way to that of my own body] (1993, vol. 1, 341). He confides in 'mi imposible amigo' [my impossible friend] (1993, vol. 1, 340), the future poet, about the lack of mutual understanding that keeps him away from those bodies. Men have begun to study his work and they find it cold or weird or lifeless. He makes no bones about his detachment from the world: 'No comprendo a los hombres' [I cannot understand mankind], and yet he is adamant that he would strike a rapport with his silent addressee, the future poet, since 'Todo es cuestión de

tiempo en esta vida,/ Un tiempo cuyo ritmo no se acuerda,/ Por largo y vasto, al otro pobre ritmo/ De nuestro tiempo humano corto y débil' [In life, it is all a matter of time,/ A time whose long, vast rhythm is out of sync/ With the poor rhythm of our short time as humans] (1993, vol. 1, 340). 'Nocturno yanqui', a poem from *Con las horas contadas* [Your Hours Are Numbered] (1950-56), clarifies the meaning of these lines: 'Mas tus lectores, si nacen,/ Y tu tiempo, no coinciden' [Your readers, if they are ever born,/ And your time do not coincide] (1993, vol. 1, 447).⁴

In *Estudios sobre poesía española contemporánea*, Cernuda discusses Vicente Aleixandre's relationship with his time along the same lines. He uses a letter published by Aleixandre in 1940 to describe his friend and fellow poet as 'un descontento, un inadaptado' [a misfit] (1994, vol. 2, 225). Aleixandre's position or his worldview, however, cannot be explained on the grounds that he is at the receiving end of any personal or social injustice: they are simply a consequence of the romantic mind that he shares with other Spanish poets who came to the fore in the 1920s, and the reason why at one stage they all sympathized with Surrealism. Cernuda highlights that Aleixandre's first collection of poetry, *Ámbito* (1928), went unnoticed, but that Aleixandre 'podía esperar, ya que [...] era de aquellos cuyo público no existía con anterioridad, sino que debía formarse lentamente' [Aleixandre could

⁴ In 'Historial de un libro', Cernuda writes: 'En otra ocasión he aludido a que me parecen existir, con respecto a la acogida que los lectores les dispensan, dos tipos de obras literarias: aquellas que encuentran a su público hecho y aquellas que necesitan que su público nazca; el gusto hacia las primeras existe ya, el de las segundas debe formarse. Creo que mi trabajo corresponde al segundo tipo [...]' [Elsewhere I have mentioned that, in my view, there are two kinds of literary works in relation to how they are received by their readership: those whose public is already out there, and those which need their public to be born; the taste for the first already exists and the taste for the latter is still to be formed. I believe that my work falls into the second category ...] (1994, vol. 2, 641-642)

wait, as he was one of those writers whose readership did not exist beforehand and would only gradually come into existence] (1994, vol. 2, 228).

The future classic has to endure the absence of contemporary readers who can engage with his work. In reality, the absence of those readers is the first step towards becoming a classic. Cernuda illustrates the process with reference to Bécquer: his work was neglected by his contemporaries; it attracted the banal attention of an ignorant public immediately after his death; then it fell into oblivion and only subsequently was incorporated into the canon. To be a classic like Garcilaso or Bécquer, a writer has to create a tradition and hand it down to his literary heirs. Garcilaso shaped two centuries of Spanish poetry. Bécquer, who had to put up with the unedifying spectacle of his contemporaries being in thrall to mediocrities such as Rivas, Zorrilla or Espronceda, is on his way to doing the same.

Harris suggests that the position of the poet both as creator and 'as a victim of Fate and society' (1973, 98) is one of Cernuda's main themes; that, in itself, would confirm his romantic credentials. As he takes stock of the various angles on poetry that can be found in *La realidad y el deseo*, Harris draws attention to 'El poeta', a text in which the poetic subject thanks Juan Ramón Jiménez for showing him where 'la rosa del mundo' [the rose of the world] is and how it grows (Cernuda 1993, vol. 1, 405). From this Harris infers that the poet is viewed as 'the creator of the world' (1973, 107), an elevated status that has a considerable downside: the poet has no alternative but to live among the vulgar men against whom Cernuda lashes out in the poems I have briefly commented on.

Ibon Zubiaur has argued convincingly that the conflict between ‘reality’ and ‘desire’ underpinning Cernuda’s work has to be read in the light of Schopenhauer:

Creo poder sugerir que *La Realidad y el Deseo* debe su título a Schopenhauer. Es evidente que resume [...] la preocupación central de Cernuda independientemente de su lectura del filósofo de Danzig, pero lo cierto es que la formulación expresa del conflicto (y la agrupación de su obra poética bajo ese título) recuerda enormemente a *El mundo como voluntad y representación*.

[I believe I can suggest that *La Realidad y el Deseo* owes its title to Schopenhauer. It is obvious that this title sums up Cernuda’s main concern irrespective of his reading of the German philosopher, but the explicit formulation of the conflict (and the fact that Cernuda gathered all his poetic work under the title *La Realidad y el Deseo*) clearly recalls *The World as Will and Representation*.] (2002, 62)

Zubiaur credits Cernuda with putting forward an original way of thinking about the category of ‘desire’, and sees in his poetic work a response to his fascination with Schopenhauer, equal only to his fascination with Nietzsche. He notes that Cernuda is not so much concerned with confronting the silence of the blank page as the silence that his work will come up against once it is in the public domain. As he grows aware of the indifference awaiting his poetry, Cernuda is troubled by the kind of silence – the oblivion – the likes of Aldana, Góngora, Altolaguirre and others were *rewarded* with. Zubiaur posits ‘oblivion’ as a ‘el tercer elemento decisivo’ [the third decisive element] or ‘un tercer elemento crucial’ [a third, crucial element] in Cernuda’s poetic cosmos, the other two being ‘reality’ and ‘desire’, and he analyses the ‘funciones’ (2002, 179) – the meanings – of ‘oblivion’ in it. They are four: 1) *nirvana-like oblivion*, which entails the elimination of desire and consequently of all the images onto which desire projects itself; 2) *mystic oblivion* understood as total

surrendering; 3) 'olvido superador' or *healing oblivion*, which is a way of leaving behind a painful experience; and 4) *social oblivion* threatening the written word.⁵

Even though Zubiaur proves that to a large extent Cernuda borrows the concept of 'oblivion' from Schopenhauer, he does not relate *social oblivion* to the philosopher's notion of 'genius'. And yet it is precisely this notion that Cernuda uses as a yardstick to establish a writer's canonicity.

For Schopenhauer, the natural function of the intellect is that of serving the will, although occasionally, and for a brief period of time, it can free itself from this servitude. When that happens, instead of knowing 'mere *relations* of things, primarily their relations to the will itself', the intellect apprehends 'the purely objective nature of a phenomenon' (1966, vol. 2, 363). Freed from its servitude under the will, the intellect 'has for its object the *Ideas*', that Schopenhauer, following Plato, defines as 'the permanent, unchangeable *forms*, independent of the temporal existence of individual beings [...], which really constitute the purely objective element of phenomena' (1966, vol. 2, 364). These ideas or forms can only enter the consciousness of an individual if he undergoes a change, an 'act of self-denial' that involves 'knowledge turning away entirely from [his] own will', and becoming 'the pure mirror of the objective inner nature of things' (1966, vol. 2, 367). Such a change amounts to 'a temporary preponderance of the intellect over the will' (1966, vol. 2, 367). Schopenhauer believes that we can only achieve an objective knowledge of the world by being less conscious of ourselves, by not being conscious that we are part of it. This objective knowledge requires 'a special energy and elasticity on the part of

⁵ See Zubiaur (2002, 179-230).

the intellect' (1966, vol. 2, 369-370) that are the characteristics of the genius: 'Genius consists precisely in the existence of a greater measure of the power of knowledge than the service of an individual will requires' (1966, vol. 2, 370). It is this surplus of the power of knowledge that can be applied to the apprehension of the world 'without reference to the will' (1966, vol. 2, 370). A disinterested, objective apprehension of the world lies at the origin of the work of art, and it can only be the result of 'a complete silencing of the will which leaves the person as pure subject of knowing. The aptitude for the prevalence of this state is simply genius' (1966, vol. 2, 371). Needless to say, 'a complete silencing of the will' is a rare occurrence and the genius an exceptional man. Schopenhauer writes:

[...] only extremely rare and abnormal men [...] are in a position to apprehend the essential element of things and of the world, and hence the highest truths, and in some way to reproduce them. For such a seriousness of the individual [...] is something foreign to human nature, something unnatural, properly speaking supernatural. But only through it is a man *great* [...]. For such a man, his painting, poetry, or thinking is an *end*; for the other it is a *means*. These others look in it for *their own interest* and, as a rule, know quite well how to promote it, for they insinuate themselves into the favour of contemporaries, and are ready to serve their wants and whims. They therefore usually live in happy circumstances; whereas the genius often exists under very wretched conditions. For he sacrifices his personal welfare to the *objective end*; he simply cannot do otherwise, because there lies his seriousness. They act conversely; therefore they are *small*, but he is *great*. His work, accordingly, is for all times and ages, but its recognition usually begins only with posterity; *they* live and die with their time. (1966, vol. 2, 384-385)

Being such a one-off, it is no wonder that 'the genius lives essentially alone. He is too rare to be capable of easily coming across his like, and too different from the rest to be their companion' (1966, vol. 2, 390). Merely talented men, well equipped to deal with the age, 'always come at the right time' and are at ease with their contemporaries, whereas the genius 'cannot go hand in hand with the regular course

of the culture of the times as found; on the contrary, he casts his works far out on to the path in front [...], on which time has first to overtake them' (1966, vol. 2, 390-391).

Now we can contextualize Cernuda's view of solitude as a 'happy island', the place where those who detach themselves from life in order to make sense of it, to *know* it – the contemplatives – take refuge; as a 'constellation' the vast majority of people cannot see, visible only to some, a small minority: it is the habitat of Schopenhauer's 'genius'.

We are also in a better position to understand Cernuda's rather old-fashioned contribution to the network of discourses that construct the Spanish canon. If he denies that the poet is an 'ineffable being with his head in the clouds' and refers to him as 'the man who is arguably in closest contact with the surrounding reality'; if he demands from the contemporary poet *strictu sensu* that he apprehend his age, it is because the poet's knowledge must be of the intuitive, objective variety that Schopenhauer's genius attains, and the poet's task is 'to apprehend the essential element of things and of the world, and hence the highest truths, and in some way to reproduce them'. If Cernuda praises the figure of the poet in general and specific poets such as Garcilaso, Góngora, Bécquer, Alexandre or Lorca, it is because he associates the figure of the poet and particularly these poets with the 'extremely rare and abnormal men' whose intellect turns away from the will and for whom poetry is not a means but an end in itself. If Cernuda dwells on the profound disagreement between the poet and his age, on the friction between poet and society that manifests itself through the meanness and stupidity of the poet's contemporaries, it is because

these contemporaries simply look after their own interests, therefore 'usually live in happy circumstances', whereas the poet works 'under very wretched conditions'. If Cernuda claims that Bécquer's readers did not exist in the 19th century, or Aleixandre's in the late 1920s, or those of the poetic subject in 'A un poeta futuro' do not exist as he speaks, it is because Bécquer, Aleixandre and this particular poetic subject fit the profile of Schopenhauer's genius, hence they 'cannot go hand in hand with the regular course of the culture of the times as found' and have to cast their works towards the future poet for whom Cernuda himself thought he was writing and about whom he dreamed, the only one who might eventually imbue his life and his task as a poet with meaning. 'A un poeta futuro', one of the most moving poems Cernuda ever wrote, ends with these lines:

Cuando en días venideros, libre el hombre
Del mundo primitivo a que hemos vuelto
De tiniebla y de horror, lleve el destino
Tu mano hacia el volumen donde yazcan
Olvidados mis versos, y lo abras,
Yo sé que sentirás mi voz llegarte,
No de la letra vieja, más del fondo
Vivo en tu entraña, con un afán sin nombre
Que tú dominarás. Escúchame y comprende.
En sus limbos mi alma quizá recuerde algo,
Y entonces en ti mismo mis sueños y deseos
Tendrán razón al fin, y habré vivido

[In days to come, once man has freed himself
From the primitive world we have regressed to,
Full of darkness and horror, when fate leads your hand
To the volume where my verses lie,
Forgotten by all, and you open it,
I know that my voice will reach you,
Not from the old writing, but from deep inside
Yourself, with a nameless yearning
That you will dominate. Listen to me and understand.

In its limbo, perhaps my soul will vaguely remember,
And then, in you, my dreams and my desires
Will at long last make sense, and I will have lived.] (1993, vol. 1, 342-343)

I am not sure that man has freed himself from the dark, primitive world experienced by Cernuda and his contemporaries. However, his voice reaches out to us across the years and, in that sense, it is true that his dreams and his desires finally make sense.

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