

NIGHT MUSIC: LUIS CERNUDA'S "LAS RUINAS"

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At the heart of Luis Cernuda's "Las ruinas" from the collection *Como quien espera el alba* of 1941-1944 are the questions which define the basic problematic of all his poetry: the anguish of human impermanence in time, the difficult achievement, beyond this anguish, of a sense of human strength and dignity. It is a lyrical poem which is about the lyrical as a quality and possibility of human experience. In this sense, "Las ruinas" is the typical Cernuda poem, a didactic reverie, an illumination posed between the conflicting terms of the poet's imaginative frame: *la realidad y (o) el deseo*.

Cernuda's explicit subject in "Las ruinas" is the traditional meditation on mutability provoked by twilight contemplation of the ruins of an ancient city. The implicit subject is the nightmare labyrinth of the Second World War. The delicate romanticism of "Las ruinas" is meant to be posed against the landscape of concentration camps, of towns and cities gutted by saturation bombing, of Guernica, Stalingrad, London, Dresden — the contemplation of Europe as an instantaneous ruin. Cernuda's cadences waver between atonality and a clear, singing lyricism. "Las ruinas" is night music in the dark night of the soul of European facism, a reverie before the encroachment of oblivion, a reverie which seeks in the extinction of human presence the outline of a new ethics, a possible dawn.

Writing "Las ruinas" Cernuda must have had before him Quevedo's model ascetic sonnets "A Roma sepultada en sus ruinas" and "Miré los muros de la patria mía." These are poems built on Quevedo's vision of the political and moral decadence of his country and the ideological concomitant of this, the severe metaphysics of the Counter Reformation which entailed a disjunction between human desire and divine entelechy. From such a point of view, the meditation on ruins contained at once a confirmation of the vanity of history and a flight away from the disintegration of the present towards an attitude of stoic detachment. For Quevedo, the ruin was simply a metaphor for the way in which the fullness human beings strive to achieve in time breaks apart, is twisted distorted, stained. His consolations are therefore the reactionary image of an imaginary Castilian Golden Age and the imagined future redemption promised in Christian eschatology; that is, something that never was and something that never will be in the time of human consciousness.

"Las ruinas", perhaps self-consciously, is the inversion of this characteristic treatment of the theme of the ruin. Cernuda feels the terror of history just as intimately as the author of the *Sueños*: the civil war, the defeat of the Spanish socialist movement he had sympathized with, his consequent exile, the titanic conflagration of the World War. Like Quevedo's sonnets, his poem is meant to force the reader to contemplate a series of objects that depict the extinction of life ("y no hallé cosa en que poner los ojos / que no

fuese recuerdo de la muerte,"). But the lesson derived from this contemplation is a different one, one in which the end points of ascetic despair and consolation are noticeably absent.

What is involved is the appropriation of a new aesthetic of the ruin as a poetic artefact. Jean Starobinski observes that in the Italian *vedute* landscapes of the eighteenth century the ruins becomes "a minor form of idyll: a new union of man and nature, through the intermediary of man's resignation to death." He goes on to say that in ruins

nature has used man's work of art as the material for its own creation, just as art had previously taken nature as its raw material. . . A balance is achieved in which the opposing forces of nature and culture are reconciled as man moves on, when the traces of human effort are fading away and the natural wilderness is regaining its lost ground, when the material forms which bear witness to the greatness of an age have not given way completely to ageless confusion.¹

Cernuda is not given, as is Jorge Guillén for example, to a language that expresses those moments of perception when the senses and the imagination joyously overflow, lifting consciousness to a sense of its transcendent participation in the world and in life. His poetry represents rather a constantly repeated choice to dwell on the most melancholy of lyric themes, those which concern the reduction or extinction of consciousness in time. He would agree with Quevedo's anguished "solamente lo fugitivo permanece y dura." But because he is a materialist poet, because he believes that the ground of human life has to be found within life itself, his point is to make an ethics out of this aesthetics of melancholy. Quevedo flees from the ruin into his self; Cernuda's strategy is to materialize the ruin, to explore its peculiar beauty which has its being only as something which is momentary and fugitive — "obras humanas que no duran" —, to fold it into the self. It is this unique poignancy which he can then counterpose against the abstract utopia of a "golden age" or a divine being that lies outside of real history: "Importa como eterno gozar de nuestro instante."²

"Las ruinas" divides into two major sections. (The text presented at the end of this article is from the third edition of *La realidad y el deseo*. Tenzontle: México, 1958). The first six stanzas are a twilight evocation of the ruins. What concerns Cernuda here is the perception of something that is disintegrating both in time and in light, but which still persists, retains substance and being, suggests the human gestures and presence of its extinct population. The subsequent five stanzas develop a meditation on the meaning of the ruins. The concluding stanza returns to the descriptive mode — night is falling over the scene, removing it from sight — but incorporates in this moment of extinction the victory of consciousness arrived at in the previous dialogue with finitude.

"Silencio y soledad nutren la hierba": the poem begins by evoking a feeling of desolation and wildness — "la golondrina con grito enajenado" — and a sort of trembling of all nature in the gathering twilight. The "luz incierta" of the moon reveals the ruins as ethereal constructions, insubstantial as music, completed only in the inner imagination of dream and desire. "Esto es el hombre" the poet exclaims enigmatically. There is a general panorama of the streets and central square of the city viewed against a background of hills (stanza three). The visual path rests for a moment on the remains of an aqueduct through which water still flows, then turns to a series of interiors of mausoleums, tombs

and the "relieves delicados" of the dead inhabitants (stanza five). It opens out again to a second panorama of the city, now noting individual "moments" of architectural detail: "las piedras que los pies vivos rozaron;" "las columnas en la plaza, testigos de luchas políticas." The carefully ordered descriptive movement seems to oscillate between dissonance ("grito" and fragile sensuality ("roce")). Note the lovely curve of the invocation – "Silencio y soledad nutren la hierba / Creciendo oscura y fuerte entre ruinas" – or the delicacy of the rendering of light and darkness in the second stanza. Throughout Cernuda works to "inhabit" the empty streets and buildings, to capture the flux of life they once contained. His descriptions resonate with the intimacy of sexual desire: "los muros que el placer de los cuerpos recataban", "el talisman irónico de un sexo poderoso", "pomos ya sin perfume". Nature, mediated in the silent activity of the ruins, becomes a series of anthropomorphic signs. The leaves of spectral trees "tiemblan vagas / Como el roce de cuerpos invisibles", the moonlight is a "paz amiga", the water in the crumbling aqueduct is like a mirror for a Narcissus "con enigmática elocuencia / de su hermosura que venció a la muerte." The meaning of the *Ecce homo* motto begins to unfold: the lingering presence of the ruins in the twilight contains and repeats the gestures, acts, faces, passions, objects which once lived within it. Human life is like this music of light and shadow, form and formlessness, absence and presence.

The twilight makes the impossible possible; everything the city once was seems to be present. But this is illusion: "tan solo ellos no están"; the city seems to wait for their return. The seventh stanza marks a transition from description to meditation. The lyrical caress of the images suddenly yields to a disillusioned recognition of reality, the contemplative, almost erotic, rapture falls away into self-consciousness and the language of the Baroque conceit:

Mas los hombres, hechos de esa materia fragmentaria
 Con que se nutre el tiempo, aunque sean
 Aptos para crear lo que resiste al tiempo,
 Ellos en cuya mente lo eterno se concibe,
 Como en el fruto el hueso encierran muerte.

Cernuda is drawn from this to protest a God who has given life a "sed de eternidad" yet compels everything to die "como villanos que deshace un soplo". Then, in reserve and very softly (stanza nine), he turns to deny the existence and power of this presence he has summoned up. Contemplating the ruins, Cernuda feels at the moment of greatest rapture the onrush of a sense of injustice in that the being "en cuya mente lo eterno se concibe" should be made of death. His impulse is to first posit, then challenge that which is seen as absolute cause and finality. Within and then against this reaction (stanza eight), however, he mediates the terms of his despair and protest and moves forward to conclude that it is "God" and not life that is a fiction: "Eres tan sólo el nombre / Que da el hombre a su miedo y impotencia." What is real instead is "estas ruinas bellas en su abandono." This is a material possibility of perception, something that turns horror into intimacy, not the empty abstraction we ourselves have made of something beyond our presence in time, our acts of making.

The meditation concludes with a gloss of Calderón's image of life as the roses which open at dawn and close in the evening: "cuna y sepulcro en un botón hallaron." Cernuda's version is "¿ Tu vida, lo mismo que la flor, es menos bella acaso / Porque

crezca y se abra en brazos de la muerte?". This is the final stage of Cernuda's anti-Baroque. The point is to reverse the didactic force of Calderón's conceit, to turn it back to life. For Cernuda, the meaning of the flower is bound up with its very temporal presumption, its *vanitas*; the poignance it thus achieves offsets the fact of its extinction, or rather, the fact of extinction — "polvo será" — sets off the glory of its being. Cernuda repeats the *Ecce homo* motto. Its meaning is now extended by the poet's achievement of a sense that life without God is not a nothingness but something like the reverie the ruins had inspired: "Delirio de la luz ya sereno a la noche, / Delirio acaso hermoso cuando es corto y es leve." (Not, that is, "en la noche" but "a la noche," against darkness.)

In the final stanza Cernuda can therefore invoke the coming of night which is death and oblivion without terror and even with a certain intimacy that before had been associated with the moonlight: "Dulce como una mano amiga que acaricia." The finality of his humanism welcomes in the night its sacrament and mystery, seeking in it a maternal presence which holds both the repose of the dead inhabitants of the ruins and the birth of new life and form. Cernuda's meditation is complete: from the wildness and uncertainty of the opening verses he has come full circle to the concluding "contemplar sereno el campo y las ruinas."

If one of Cernuda's reference points in "Las ruinas" is the Baroque ascetic conceit, turned "on its head", the inner analogue of the poem is clearly John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In both poems, there is a contemplation of the artefacts of a vanished civilization and an effort, through this contemplation, to fix the meaning of human presence in time; in both, there is a rejection of an otherworldly apotheosis, implicit in the "Ode", explicit in "Las ruinas", and the assumption, instead, of a tone of "sweet melancholy" which recognizes the transitory nature of life but finds pleasure in the play of human presence and absence in time. Finally, in both the aesthetic mediation of the theme of death comes to represent in itself the quality and possibility of a purely human hope for persistence in time, a hope that joins "realidad y deseo." For Keats this hope is the eternalization of human action in art, figured in the frozen gestures of the lovers on the urn; for Cernuda, it is the perception of the flickering presence of life among "obras humanas que no duran." The object contemplated in both poems fuses implicitly with the act of contemplation itself. Like the crepuscular vision of the ruins which it describes, like the mediated sense of human finality it arrives at, "Las ruinas" is itself "delirio acaso hermoso cuando es corto y es leve." With the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" it shares the strength and moral beauty of those works of art which are mirrors of themselves.

A note on prosody

Cernuda maintains a very clear texture even in the difficult **conceptismo** of the last half of the poem. There is little here of that extreme hermeticism and ellipsis which characterizes, for example, Valéry's elegaic poem on the maritime cemetery. Rather Cernuda, a professed neo-Romantic, has managed to preserve, paradoxically, something of the classicism of a Quevedo: everything is measured, balanced and meticulously disposed in controlled rhetorical periods. The meter varies throughout the poem between eleven

and fifteen syllables yet it suggests, especially in Cernuda's handling of the various possibilities of internal stress points in the line, the stately but at the same time supple progressions of the Renaissance hendecasyllable. While there is no definite rhyme scheme, one senses the suggestion of an asonant pattern (an abundance of endings *i-a*, for example) and several isolated consonants (in stanza six "rozaron" of the first verse with "esperaron" of the last). The expert poetic sensibility of Cernuda reveals itself especially well here, as these fragile approximations of rhyme function expressively very well to describe the fugitive, "luz incierta" of the ruins. Cernuda speaks of his poems as: "algo cuya causa, a manera de fugacísima luz entra tinieblas eternas o sombra súbita entre la luz agobiadora, permanece escondida."³

NOTES

¹ Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Freedom* (Skira: Geneva, 1964), pp. 179-81.

² To put this another way, the Cernuda of "Las ruinas" is closer to the texture of a poem like Rodrigo Caro's "Canción a las ruinas de Itálica" or Góngora's brief elegy in the *Soledad primera* (212-21), that is, to use Wallace Steven's phrase, to a "poetry of earth."

³ Luis Cernuda, "Poética" in Gerardo Diego (ed.), *Poesía española contemporánea* (Taurus: Madrid, 1962), p. 657.

LAS RUINAS

Silencio y soledad nutren la hierba
 Creciendo oscura y fuerte entre ruinas,
 Mientras la golondrina con grito enajenado
 Va por el aire vasto, y bajo el viento
 Las hojas en las ramas tiemblan vagas
 Como al roce de cuerpos invisibles.

Puro, de plata nebulosa, ya levanta
 El agudo creciente de la luna
 Vertiendo por el campo paz amiga
 Y en esta luz incierta las ruinas de mármol
 Son construcciones bellas, musicales,
 Que el sueño completó.

Esto es el hombre. Mira

La avenida de tumbas y cipreses, y las calles
 Llevando al corazón de la gran plaza
 Abierta a un horizonte de colinas:
 Todo está igual, aunque una sombra sea
 De lo que fue hace siglos, mas sin gente.

Levanta ese titánico acueducto
 Arcos rotos y secos por el valle agreste
 Adonde el mirto crece con la anémona,
 En tanto el agua libre entre los juncos
 Pasa con la enigmática elocuencia
 De su hermosura que venció a la muerte.

En las tumbas vacías, las urnas sin cenizas,
 Conmemoran aún relieves delicados
 Muertos que ya no son sino la inmensa muerte anónima,
 Aunque sus prendas leves sobrevivan:
 Pomos ya sin perfume, sortijas y joyeles
 O el talismán irónico de un sexo poderoso,
 Que el trágico desdén del tiempo perdonara.

Las piedras que los pies vivos rozaron
 En centurias atrás, aún permanecen
 Quietas en su lugar, y las columnas
 En la plaza, testigos de las luchas políticas,
 Y los altares donde sacrificaron y esperaron,
 Y los muros que el placer de los cuerpos recataban.

Tan sólo ellos no están. Este silencio
 Parece que aguardase la vuelta de sus vidas.
 Mas los hombres, hechos de esa materia fragmentaria
 Con que se nutre el tiempo, aunque sean
 Aptos para crear lo que resiste al tiempo,
 Ellos en cuya mente lo eterno se concibe,
 Como en el fruto el hueso encierran muerte.

Oh Dios. Tú que nos has hecho
Para morir, ¿ por qué nos infundiste
La sed de eternidad, que hace al poeta?
¿ Puedes dejar así, siglo tras siglo,
Caer como vilanos que deshace un soplo
Los hijos de la luz en la tiniebla avara?

Mas tú no existes. Eres tan sólo el nombre
Que da el hombre a su miedo y su impotencia,
Y la vida sin ti es esto que parecen
Estas mismas ruinas bellas en su abandono:
Delirio de la luz ya sereno a la noche,
Delirio acaso hermoso cuando es corto y es leve.

Todo lo que es hermoso tiene su instante, y pasa.
Importa como eterno gozar de nuestro instante.
Yo no te envidio, Dios; déjame a solas
Con mis obras humanas que no duran:
El afán de llenar lo que es efímero
De eternidad, vale tu omnipotencia.

Esto es el hombre. Aprende pues, y cesa
De perseguir eternos dioses sordos
Que tu plegaria nutre y tu olvido aniquila.
Tu vida, lo mismo que la flor, ¿ es menos bella acaso
Porque crezca y se abra en brazos de la muerte?

Sagrada y misteriosa cae la noche,
Dulce como una mano amiga que acaricia,
Y en su pecho, donde tal ahora yo, otros un día
Descansaron la frente, me reclino
A contemplar sereno el campo y las ruinas.