

Eulogy for a Basque Youth in England – Poem by Luis Cernuda

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According to my understanding, the poem by Luis Cernuda is a meditation on memory and the pain and wish to be near a loved one who has passed away.

‘He was the first Spanish boy to die in exile. This event and the following circumstances referred to here, bring to light a less known legend about this death, that was soon dismissed’.

I find it hard to write about this without thinking of Elvi, the younger sister of this boy, José. His absence, even today, is felt in every word that recalls memory, love or loss. This writing, although dedicated to her brother, allows her to be always present beside him, and to keep alive his quiet presence beyond time and place. I want to be with you, Elvi; you are not alone.

To give you some idea of the background, Cernuda arrived in London in 1938 at the height of the Civil War, where he took care of exiled Basque children. In this context, he knows José, the boy who in a short while would become seriously ill and would die. José rejected the last sacraments and the crucifix that a priest offered him. Instead, he requested to see Cernuda and asked him to read him a poem. Cernuda having done this, José said “Please Sir, don’t go away, I must now turn to face the wall so that you don’t see me die”. Cernuda and the Spanish nurse standing by the bed thought it was a macabre joke. Seconds later, José was dead. The boy gifted him his last breath, a gesture that inspired the writer to write this poem which immortalised his final farewell.

In the following days, Cernuda became more despondent than ever: deeply saddened, sometimes irritable, and clearly depressed. One thing that was uppermost in his mind was a decision he obstinately repeated: “after all I have seen and gone through,” he would say, “I will never again set foot in a home for Basque children”

Letter 28th March, 1938.

Dear Mrs Riaño,

By now, you will have received the news from the Secretary of the local committee, Miss Vulliamy, that José was sent to hospital in Oxford and that he was seriously ill.

It is with sincere condolences that I now pressed to write to you with the sad news that José died this morning.

During the last week, the boy was very ill and received all the attention and care that you, as the mother, would have liked him to have. The two doctors, whom you might remember from the time they were in Bilbao examining the children before embarking, saw José and informed us that his condition was such that there was no hope in saving his life. He died of jaundice with liver complications.

Please accept our deepest sympathy in conveying this sad news to you. We hoped that after the war, we would be sending him back to you safe and sound, but instead, I have no alternative but to send you this distressing news. On behalf of the committee, I send you our most sincere condolences.

Yours faithfully,

Betty L. Arne,

Secretary.

With this sorrowful letter, a mother is informed of a son's final dreams: a boy with a promising and brilliant future and an example to be followed by his younger sister, even though she had not yet turned seven when she last saw him. Nevertheless, she held him close to her heart, both in her memory and in her living room where his photograph presides over every after-dinner reunion, looking serious, hair combed to one side. It is a hand-coloured photograph in which he is wearing a formal suit, with irregular spots on a red tie over a white shirt. From his privileged place on the wall, he seems to be looking at everything that is going on there.

Photo: José Sobrino Riaño hanging in the living room of his sister Elvi.

In many of those after dinner reunions, Elvi would tell me stories about her life and her family as well as stories about José, or Pepe, as she called him.

The family of these siblings were from the Rioja region. Their father worked in the Santa Ana factory, and although her three older brothers were born in Casalarreina, she took pride in having been born in Casa del Río. It was a family rooted among the hills of Bolueta within the stronghold of La Rioja.

In Cernuda's third verse, a landscape filled with nostalgia and symbolism is evoked; where nature and buildings take on a spiritual and emotional meaning. What comes to mind when I read this paragraph, is an old photograph of the Santa Ana factory, in a place where Pepe lived his last days with the family before leaving for exile. It is evident that this author's poem explores these images from an emotional and symbolic perspective, but I like to think that it is destiny that is winking its eye at us.

This image of his land, this comparison, brings to mind how landscapes, whether literary or visual, can be connected to each other from different perspectives. While Cernuda uses his landscape to meditate on loss, memory and death, without realising it, he is describing Pepe's home.

On reading the fifth verse of Cernuda's poem, I cannot avoid dwelling on what for me, is one of the hardest moments: that final moment, in the hospital, when Pepe faces death with his eyes open, without solace. I feel that the poet is stricken with a wound which does not heal completely when he states "I could have shared those hours"; as if that unfulfilled wish is still haunting him. For me, it feels like a silent suffering, a deep guilt for not having been able to do what he wanted to do, for not having been able to alleviate the suffering of the other.

I am also taken by one phrase which makes an impact on me with particular force: 'Your death, the one that was destined.' It is not a casual or a chosen death: it is an assigned death imposed from outside, as if someone, history, war or exile, had decided it beforehand. In that verse, Cernuda does not only point to loss, but also to the injustice of a destiny that snatches someone away without permission. The idea of that inevitable death, programmed for the young like Pepe, is very moving and it hurts to imagine the helplessness of the poet in the face of an ending he could not avoid. That phrase also encompasses a silent anger, a criticism that does not scream, but sinks deep.

This verse makes me think of how complex it is to accompany someone in their last days. I realise how difficult it can be to be truly present beyond a physical presence. For me, the poem is not just about the theme of death, it also expresses that heartbreaking helplessness of the one living, that feeling that he could have done something more, to have offered something which perhaps could no longer be given.

I cannot help connecting these words with other farewells I have personally experienced. It resonates with those, like Pepe, who died alone, far from their country. Although I know that Cernuda is writing from his own experience, I feel that his poem transcends the personal and touches on collective emotion: of the exile, illness, loss. And there, in that realisation, I find some consolation: as if his verses also allow us to say to our own departed ones, "I would have wanted to be with you; you are not alone".

Photo: children posing with copies of Solidaridad Obrera. (Solidarity of Workers) Pepe; third from right, top row.

I remember a story that Elvi told me about her brother Pepe when he was working as a watchmaker's apprentice, shortly before the war broke out. One afternoon, the owner of the watchmaker's shop he worked in, requested that he ask his mother to come round to the shop and have a word with him. When he arrived home and casually gave the message to her, he had no idea what was about to come his way. The worried look on his mother's face was more than evident, she did not understand the reason for it and Pepe was not able to explain. Pepe, unperturbed, swore that it had done nothing wrong. But his mother Rosa, being sceptical, dragged him to the shop by the ears with a few slaps on the way, while wondering what type of mischief his eldest son had been up to, not ever having had any complaints about him before, and feeling ashamed just thinking about it.

When they arrived at the shop, the watchmaker took out an exercise book exhibiting Pepe's sketches and writing: detailed drawings of gears and clocks, landscape drawings, portraits and fragments of stories and reflections. The owner had no complaints at all about Pepe, he was working well, was responsible, dedicated, patient, and paid attention to detail. He had asked to see her because he thought Pepe had great talent. He wanted to tell her that if they could, and if they had the means, they should look for a place where he could develop his talent. His mother already knew. She was aware of her son's sensitivity and his ability to observe the world. It was not in vain that he had been honourably mentioned in school two years ago.

Among the memorabilia that Elvi kept, I found a photo of the summer of 1937. In this photo, Pepe and his brother Luis together with other companions are mowing the tall grass of a field to turn it into a football pitch. Finally, due to the heat and exhaustion after working with the sickle, they decided to set fire to the dry grass with a match, thus clearing the ground. The football pitch was made and there they played many games against the English boys.

Photograph: the ones marked by a cross are José (with his shirt on), and his brother Luis in exile, summer 1937.

Finally, illness cut short Pepe's future. Rosa was never able to help him with his education, just because through love, she had to separate from him and his brothers that were sent to exile to save them from war. Many years later, I learned that Lord Faringdon, a British aristocrat known for his philanthropic work and support for the refugees of the Spanish Civil War, as well as being recognised for his unwavering commitment that led to him to convert one of his buildings on his property into 'La Casa Vasca' (Basque House), impressed by Pepe's intelligence, was thinking of sending him to a private school at his own expense, an offer that Pepe rejected. He had a different idea about his future though he did not yet know what other plans Destiny had for him in store.

As the years went by, more documents came to light around these events. According to the British coroner's records, the real cause of his death was a 'late arsenical poisoning, administered as a therapeutic measure for a specific congenital disease'. A congenital disease that his family was unaware of, and of which they were informed via a letter sent on the 25th of March by Miss Vulliamy, in which it is pointed out that he had been taken ill almost suddenly, due to an inflammation of the liver.

This was a common remedy of those times, although difficult to imagine it today. There are still some unexplained areas, and the borderline between an emergency treatment and unclear circumstances are tenuous. It was not only the war or the exile that finished his life, but also the intent to save him...or perhaps something mysterious that put out the flame of hope amid an uprooted life.

Wherever you are, Pepe, if at any time, as Luis Cernuda says, you thought that your life was a matter to be forgotten, I am proud to be the person that many years later treasures part of your legacy. I imagine that slow, melancholic fading away so far from home yet so unexpectedly and fleetingly lived, then only three days later, in red ink and typed, Miss Vulliamy, a woman whose courage and determination not only led her to look after displaced children, but also convinced the reticent Lord Faringdon to cede one of his properties to shelter them, sent a letter notifying your mother of your sudden illness and your admission to the Oxford University Hospital. Another letter followed, this one typed in black ink with the sad news of your farewell. According to the last letter received, all the people of the colony attended your departing, which took place in Oxford, together with English people from this city and the Basque Delegate in London, Jose Ignacio Lizaso. The coffin was carried to the grave on the boys' shoulders, and as the coffin was lowered, they sang hymns. Several of your companions spoke and said goodbye with tears in their eyes, thinking it was the resting place only until the end of the war. Yet, you never returned, neither you nor your remains, only the memories of you returned.