

## FRANCISCO BRINES AND THE HUMANIST CLOSET

THE majority of critical studies devoted to Francisco Brines insist upon the universality of his concerns. For Carlos Bousoño, the author of an important early study, Brines' poetry, while rooted in the particularity of his experience, ultimately transcends the merely personal, suppressing details that do not pertain to his more general themes: death, the passage of time, and the transitory nature of human existence. José Olivio Jiménez, likewise, speaks of "la indiscutible universalidad de su canto hondamente elegíaco, en el que, a un tiempo, el hombre se empeña en afirmar su débil realidad y la hermosura del mundo y de la vida" (Brines, *Antología poética* 8). Man and his existential problems are also crucial for North-American Hispanists like Andrew Debicki and Judith Nantell: "Francisco Brines' *Insistencias en Luzbel* (1977) presents the reader with highly complex and often cryptic portraits of the modes of being displayed by man as he lives and works out his existence" (Nantell, "Modos de ser" 33). Whatever their differences, these critics share an underlying commitment to one of the fundamental tenets of humanist ideology: the universality of human experience. Thus Brines' poetry, in the eyes of its most influential interpreters, comes to epitomize the values of humanist existentialism.<sup>1</sup>

By categorizing some preoccupations as universal and others as merely personal or anecdotal, a humanist reading excludes from the outset any consideration of the homoeroticism of Brines' poetry: the author's sexuality is merely a circumstantial detail that is left behind in the quest for universality. The homoerotic content of this poetry is thus an "open secret," perceived by many readers but rarely acknowledged openly in critical studies.<sup>2</sup> One aim of my reading of Brines' work, then, is to bring him out of the humanist closet by uncovering the sexual content of his work. While Brines' homoeroticism is not exactly hidden from view, most critics prefer to speak of "love," or "eroticism" in the abstract, without specifying the gender of the object of desire.<sup>3</sup> Because of the "presumption of heterosexuality" that makes gay concerns seem inherently less universal, the critics are careful to speak in the more general terms that will be acceptable to the presumptively heterosexual reader.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to Bousoño's study, "La poesía de Francisco Brines" (*Poesía poscontemporánea* 21-114), the most influential essays on Brines' work have been those of José Olivio Jiménez, "La poesía de Francisco Brines" (*Cinco poetas del tiempo* 399-458) and Andrew Debicki, "Francisco Brines: Text and Reader" (*Poetry of Discovery* 20-39). There are differences of approach among Brines' critics. Debicki, for example, studies the relation between reader and text, while Jiménez is more purely thematic. With the notable exception of Arkinstall, however, most critics treat Brines as an existentialist concerned with "universal" problems.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the complex dynamics of the "open secret" see the title essay of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67-90.

<sup>3</sup> Persin, "Sexual Politics," Gallego, "El tema del amor," and Benson, "El amor contra la nada" purport to deal with the theme of love in Brines' work, but none of these articles refers explicitly to homosexuality. The only critic to concede any importance to Brines' homosexuality is Arkinstall.

It would be a mistake, nevertheless, simply to reject the standard humanist interpretation of Brines' poetry in favor of a "gay reading."<sup>4</sup> The rhetorical strategies of the poetry itself offer resistance to such a "minoritizing" reading; the author's own stance, like that of most of his exegetes, is rooted in the existentialism of the 1950s. What I have called the humanist reading of Brines' work, then, is not an imposition of an alien interpretation, but rather an echo of the author's own explicit ideology. Brines himself is conscious of writing in a decidedly unoriginal idiom: "No me importa repetir las palabras, y que éstas sean palabras gastadas, si es que obedecen necesariamente a la expresividad del poema. Lo que yo canto es un mundo tan gastado que la búsqueda de la originalidad podría fácilmente traicionarla" (*Selección propia* 40-41). The justification for Brines' lack of interest in originality can be located in the belief that human nature is everywhere and always the same: "El poeta griego y el de hoy son, en lo fundamental, el mismo, porque la humana conciencia no ha variado en lo esencial, y la existencia está cercada por los mismos enigmas" (*Selección propia* 41). Given this essentialist and universalist position, it becomes more difficult to read Brines' poetry in a seemingly more limited way, as the product of a specifically gay sensibility. Still, the humanist reading that stresses what Brines shares with all other human beings does not account for what is arguably the most compelling feature of his poetry: the tension between the appeal to "universal" values and his own highly individuated sensibility. While in theory his poetry strives to address the concerns of all human beings, in practice it is double-voiced, combining a seemingly conventional humanist rhetoric with a rather unconventional vision that challenges the very idea of universality.

#### THE PRESUMPTION OF HETEROSEXUALITY

Whether Brines' homoeroticism is judged to be self-evident or tantalizingly concealed beneath the surface will depend to a large extent on the reader's perspective. Some readers simply assume that Brines' love is heterosexual. Margaret Persin's comparison between love and the writing of poetry is a case in point: "Love is similar to lyrical creativity in that in the bonding that occurs in both experiences, there is an opportunity to create a separate reality. In the case of human love, the result is the creation of another human being, conceived in the likeness of the two partners" (91). The presumption of heterosexuality can be so powerful that it can color the perception of readers even when they are fully aware that they are reading gay poetry. In her explication of "Encuentro urbano," a text from *Poemas excluidos*, Nantell assumes that the hypothetical reader will first reach for a heterosexual explanation of the details of the poem:

<sup>4</sup> Arkinstall's contention that Brines' poetry constitutes a protest against the Franco regime's suppression of homosexuality seems off the mark, since it ignores the way in which his poetry has actually been read in Spain. Brines' protest is muted at best. Her reading, nevertheless, has the inestimable virtue of bringing the issue of homosexuality into the open.

[...] a first reading of "Encuentro urbano" might focus on the poetic speaker's recollection of a heterosexual amorous experience since the repeated object pronouns "nos," "me," and "te" are ambiguous with respect to gender and also since the speaker's observation "doblado en la ventana" follows the description "adivino de lejos tu postura." A new reading, however, might focus on the phrases "doblado en la ventana," "te quedabas serio," "en mi país salvaje," and "Tienes suave la piel, y muy amigos / los ojos," which could point to a homosexual amorous experience if the first person speaker of the poem is viewed as male. ("Retracing the Text" 203; parenthetical references to stanza and line numbers omitted)

The strategy of contrasting a first, usually less complex reading, to a richer second reading is adopted from Debicki's *Poetry of Discovery*. The problem with Nantell's use of reader-response criticism in this particular instance is that it posits a presumptively heterosexual reader. Pronouns of ambiguous gender, for example, are more frequent in gay than in heterosexual love poetry, in which there is no particular reason to conceal the sex of the object of desire. Yet the critic takes this ambiguity as evidence of heterosexuality, assuming that the reader will have to peruse the text again before noticing *unambiguous* references to the masculine gender.<sup>5</sup>

As these examples reveal, the automatic presumption of heterosexuality can create a sort of optical illusion, leading critics to see references to non-existent female figures. Even when they acknowledge the homoeroticism of Brines' poetry, critics downplay it, as though the sex of the object of desire were purely irrelevant. Indeed, one argument would be that Brines' mostly implicit homoeroticism does not seriously affect the interpretation of his work. Brines' characteristic mode, after all, is to translate his own particular experiences into more universal terms. Since the poet de-emphasizes the particularity of his amorous experiences, his critics might feel justified in doing the same.

Many of Brines' poems read like intimate confessions with the personal details omitted. They have the emotional intensity of "confessional" poetry while deliberately avoiding anecdote. The reader witnesses the speaker's emotional states, but rarely glimpses the motivations behind these emotions:

La última mañana en la ciudad  
 amanece con luz marchita. Vengo  
 de habitar en la noche, voy al día  
 con sueño, con los ojos muy cansados.  
 Estas horas terribles en extrañas  
 ciudades aconsejan al viajero  
 que retome al hogar, en donde el tiempo  
 no estraga tan temprano el corazón.

("Impresión repetida"; *Ensayo de una despedida* 78)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Nantell, to her credit, is one of the few Brines scholars who actually *mentions* a possible homosexual reading of his poetry. Her book-length study of his poetry, nevertheless, does not take up this thread (*The Poetry of Francisco Brines*).

<sup>6</sup> All subsequent references to Brines' work will be to this edition, unless otherwise noted.

In the third and final sentence of this brief text, the first person speaker shifts to the third person in order to generalize from his personal experience. The repeated use of the definite article underscores the generic nature of the experience. The speaker could be any traveler in any city far from home; like all human beings, he is subject to the ravages of time. Since the protagonist of the poem is a generic subject, with no individuality to speak of, any reader will presumably be able to identify with his predicament.

For Carlos Bousoño, Brines' "pudor," his unwillingness to reveal the details of his private life, is motivated by his universalist aspirations; it arises from

un impulso de solidaridad con los hombres de todos los tiempos, y no sólo con la parcela actual de ellos. En tan vasta comunión, sentida como esencial, queda cercenado, en lo que atañe a lo sustantivo, cuanto excede la condición metafísica del hombre, que es lo único compartible con tanta universalidad, condición en la que prima la idea de muerte. (99)

Bousoño's argument, then, is that the poet's wish to express the existential dilemma of the "universal" subject, tellingly identified as a *male* subject ("el hombre"), requires the suppression of personal details, since these details would bring to the foreground the subject's supposedly non-universal idiosyncracies.

It is easy to see why this line of thinking rules out a possible gay reading of Brines's work: the particular interests of gays, in so far as these interests diverge from those of other men, have no claim to universality. In Bousoño's terms, these interests would undoubtedly "exceed the metaphysical condition of man." The paradox is that the humanist aspiration to encompass humanity in its entirety results in a radical reduction of the range of possible literary themes. If the only thing that all human beings have in common is the experience of temporality and death, then nothing else is really worth mentioning: anything that cannot be expressed in these existentialist terms becomes trivial by comparison.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever its motivation, Brines' reticence serves to protect presumptively heterosexual critics and readers from the homoeroticism of his verse. The alibi of "pudor" also relieves the critic of the obligation of studying the "non-universal" concerns that the poet himself prefers not to emphasize. The problem, however, is that Brines' poetry often does raise the issue of same-sex desire. In his demonstration of the poet's "pudor," for example, Bousoño cites "Versos épicos," a poem that refers to an explicitly homoerotic episode from Virgil's *Aeneid*. In this case it is not Brines but Bousoño who chooses to avoid any mention of homosexuality:

Casi desnudo bajo el fuego del día  
miro la solidez del mar, abierto por los brazos  
de vigorosos nadadores jóvenes,

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<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically, it is the existential vocabulary of humanist criticism that ultimately sounds banal, reduced as it is to a handful of commonplaces about the transitoriness of human life.

a la orilla de Trápani.  
 Y rodeados de gente indiferente, aquellos dos  
 de ardientes ojos,  
 de feliz semblante, recogidos.  
 ¿Y quién cantará el amor sino el poeta?  
 Desde su soledad el joven extranjero  
 os observa con luz benevolente,  
 y agradece a la vida testimoniar vuestra hermosura.

Fue aquí, debajo de este sol y en la misma ribera,  
 la estratagema de aquel ligero mozo  
 que, en carrera pedestre que presidiera Eneas,  
 impidió la victoria de un rival  
 por ver sobre el caballo, desnudo y coronado de oliva florecida,  
 al vencedor Euríalo, de juvenil belleza.  
 Una historia de amantes, vulgar  
 y cotidiana, de otros tiempos.

(79-80)

It is true that these lines do not reveal any intimate details of the poet's life. He undoubtedly views his own personal story, like that of the lovers in the *Aeneid*, as "vulgar y cotidiana." Still, the homoeroticism of this poem is strong and unmistakable. The fact that Bousoño chooses this particular text to demonstrate the concept of "pudor" reveals that it is homosexuality, and not any other private matter, that requires such delicate handling. Indeed, "pudor" would not even be an issue in the work of a heterosexual poet.<sup>8</sup>

#### MISOGYNY AND HOMOSOCIAL DESIRE

Bousoño's discussion of "pudor" is predicated on the implicit notion that an open discussion of homosexuality would threaten the universality of Brines' work. For Brines himself, however, there is no dichotomy between universality and homosexuality. On the contrary, his poetry consistently constructs the normative human subject as a male homosexual. The language of humanism and the language of (male) homosexuality share at least one key term: *hombre*. This word, of course, refers both to the (pseudo-universal) human subject and to the male of the species. The word is ubiquitous in Spanish poetry of the post-war period, where it is fraught with existentialist, social, and political significance. Brines, in effect, eroticizes this key term of humanist discourse, revealing the "homosocial desire" that this discourse often masks. At the same time, he does so in a way that does not interfere with existentialist readings of his work. As often happens, the expression of the homosocial bond, even one with erotic overtones, simultaneously serves to keep homosexuality itself out of sight.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The most immediate model for Brines' sense of reserve is Luis Cernuda, another gay poet whose declarations of his own sexuality tended to omit purely personal, anecdotal details.

<sup>9</sup> See Sedgwick, *Between Men* 1-15 for an illuminating exploration of the relation between homosocial desire and homosexuality itself.

The traditional identification between the masculine and the universal allows Brines to speak of a pseudo-universal “mankind” (“el hombre”) while simultaneously referring, in oblique fashion, to erotic love between males. Brines’ use of the word *hombre* and the masculine gender can thus send ambiguous signals. This ambiguity is sustained throughout Brines’ poetic production. The entire fifth section of *Palabras a la oscuridad* is devoted to the theme of love, yet never is the gender of the love object specified. The same is true of *Poemas a D.K.*, an anthology of love poems originally published in Brines’ other collections. D.K., the person to whom all the poems in the book are devoted, is identified only by these initials.<sup>10</sup>

While some readers will simply assume that D.K. is male, for others Brines’ references will remain ambiguous. It could be argued that, in the absence of unequivocal indications, Brines’ poems could be read either as heterosexual or homosexual. At the same time, the repeated insistence on the masculinity of the human subject in Brines’ poetry leaves little space for a heterosexual reading:

Alguien baja el amor sobre los hombres,  
los cubre de su gracia, y al hacerlo  
cantan las aves, vuelan, las espumas  
dejan el mar en las orillas, crecen  
con un temblor las ramas, se desplazan  
los astros en el cielo...

(“El velo del amor”; 109)

It is entirely possible to understand the word *hombres* in this passage as a reference to the universal human subject (“mankind”). In fact, this is the most obvious reading. If this poem is read alongside of Brines’ other love poems, however, a pattern begins to emerge: the object of desire is consistently represented by a noun in the masculine gender such as *amor*, *cuerpo*, or *rostro*:

Que no hay felicidad  
tan repetida y plena  
como pasar la noche,  
romper la madrugada,  
con un ardiente cuerpo.  
Con un oscuro cuerpo,  
de quien nada conozco  
sino su juventud.

(“Canción de los cuerpos”; 231)

Brines’ systematic use of this metonymical substitution recalls Cernuda’s “*Poemas para un cuerpo*.” As in Cernuda’s poetry, the gender of the love-object is left ambiguous but there is no real deception – except for readers who choose to be deceived.

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<sup>10</sup> In *Ensayo de una despedida* (1983) the poem “Causa del amor” is dedicated to Detlev Klugkist. This dedication, which did not figure in the original printing of the poem in *Palabras a la oscuridad*, is also omitted in *Poemas a D.K.* itself.

The homosexuality of Brines' poetry entails not only the exclusion of women as objects of desire, quite understandable in a gay poet, but also a more overt misogyny that surfaces in his relatively infrequent depictions of female sexuality. Thus the speaker of "El hijo de Lot," a satirical poem from *Aún no*, reproaches a mature woman for allowing a young boy to see her naked body:

Debo reconvenirte, vieja amiga,  
 por tus descuidos. El pequeño Antonio  
 te vio desnuda en la bañera, y sufre  
 trastornos del alma. Desvaría, dice  
 que tu cuerpo es lascivo, y aun horrendo,  
 y busca semejanzas, siempre torpes:  
 que es como ver desnudo a un negro grande,  
 en una negra alcoba, y él precisa,  
 o a un conejo sin piel. Lo teme todo  
 su director de espíritu: suicidio  
 moral, que el insensato se despeñe  
 contra naturaleza. Yo presiento  
 algún castigo bíblico al curioso:  
 monumento salado, no; un mito  
 más durable: espacio geográfico,  
 aunque yermo; por causa de su sexo,  
 que en prematura edad tornaste casto,  
 ya es casquete polar para los siglos.

(175)

This text is an obvious variation on the Freudian theme of castration anxiety: as his clumsy comparisons reveal, the young boy's horror of the female genitals arises from his fear of losing his own.<sup>11</sup> This fear will condemn him to a life of glacial asexuality.

Brines' satirical poems are often difficult to interpret, since it is not clear whether the speaker's viewpoint is meant to be taken literally or ironically. In "El hijo de Lot," the internal contradictions in the speaker's perspective suggest an ironical reading. The boy's priest fears that Antonio will sin "contra naturaleza," in other words, that he will become homosexual. Yet this fear is itself based on an implicitly "homosexual" assumption: for the priest, as for the young boy, the female genitals are so hideous that they will inevitably evoke madness and disgust rather than desire. The poem reverses habitual perspectives: here it is Lot's son, rather than his wife, whose gaze leads to a "biblical punishment." The object of his forbidden vision is not Sodom, associated with male homosexuality both in the biblical account and in popular tradition, but rather the female body.

Whether the reader attributes the misogyny of "El hijo de Lot" to the speaker or to the implied author, the poem illustrates Brines' generally derogatory depiction of female sexuality. His ironic treatment of sex in this poem stands in sharp contrast to the idealization of masculine love in poems

<sup>11</sup> The racism of the boy's comparison between the female genitals and "un gran negro" is also notable: a sexual other is associated metaphorically with a racial other.

like “Versos épicos.” Similarly disparaging representations of women can be found among the satirical poems of *Aún no* and *Insistencias en Luzbel*. In the ironically titled “La dama,” the reality of the world is represented metaphorically by an old, unattractive prostitute:

Hemos gozado mucho de la dama,  
aunque alguno, inocente en demasía,  
detrás de la apariencia vio algún engaño oculto,  
y no siguió nuestro gozar frenético;  
como dama escogió a la insípida muerte.

Gocemos de la vieja prostituta, tan sabia  
en el amor, y aunque manche nuestra joven carne  
con hediondos afeites,  
no hay otra vida que escoger podemos,  
sino esta vieja y negra prostituta.

(163)

This poem reverses the conventional hermeneutic notion that the truth lies beneath deceptive surfaces: paradoxically, it is not those taken in by false appearances who are innocent, but the one who is excessively wary of being deceived.<sup>12</sup> Where a baroque poem might warn against taking appearances at face value, Brines insists that it is naive to assume the existence of any transcendent reality.

Like “El hijo de Lot,” “La dama” challenges conventional perspectives on reality while simultaneously perpetuating the time-worn identification between female sexuality and degradation.<sup>13</sup> The strikingly misogynist (and perhaps racist) image of the “vieja y negra prostituta” ultimately serves to reinforce the homosocial bond among (white) men who share a common destiny as human subjects. The act of heterosexual intercourse, in this text, is decidedly secondary to this homosocial bond. The woman’s unattractiveness and the sordidness of the sexual act seem to reinforce the men’s sense of human solidarity, a solidarity from which the woman, needless to say, is excluded. While the men are young and pure, “joven carne,” the older woman’s “hediondos afeites” represent the corruption that they will inevitably experience in the world.

#### A HOMOSEXUAL PERSPECTIVE

In other satiric poems, Brines’ target is not women per se, but heterosexuality. In “Un amor español,” for example, the speaker plays with the notion that conventional marriage is essentially incestuous. He turns the tables on the presumably virtuous man who boasts that he loves his wife “como se quiere a

<sup>12</sup> Compare Claudio Rodríguez’s “Brujas a mediodía,” another poem that uses the image of aged women to represent an epistemological engagement with the deceptiveness of reality (*Desde mis poemas* 127-30).

<sup>13</sup> Another poem that presents a negative vision of women is “De burlas y justicias,” which begins “Adúltera y adúltera charlaban” (*Ensayo de una despedida* 172).



una madre.” An excess of virtue leads to its opposite, an even greater perversion:

Es un amor muy santo, y de buen español;  
pero en este país, hay más virtud  
aún de la que crees:  
los sumos virtuosos te organizan  
infierno con calderas,  
pues no hay perdón posible en el incesto.

(175)

In this and other texts Brines’ ironic vision aims toward a reversal and a defamiliarization of the dominant heterosexual viewpoint. His own perspective, then, is highly specific despite its universalist aspirations: it is rooted in a particular understanding of reality that is not shared by all human beings.<sup>14</sup>

“Exabrupto,” a poem from *Insistencias en Luzbel*, illustrates the particularity of Brines’ vision. The speaker of the poem witnesses an accusation that would appear to threaten the unity of the universal humanist subject:

Oí lo que el muchacho te decía:  
“... pues eso que tú eres”. Y la palabra torpe  
dicha con inocencia.  
Percibí tu vergüenza. Yo un denso aburrimiento  
al comprobar la necedad del mundo,  
o su boba ignorancia una vez más.

(230)

The scene described is easily identifiable: the boy “interpellates” the addressee of the poem with a word like *maricón*.<sup>15</sup> (With characteristic *pudor*, Brines withholds the insulting epithet, thus making the anecdote generalizable to other, analogous situations.) In his “innocent” assumption that this word is an accurate label for the man’s sexual difference – “eso que tú eres” – the boy fails to grant the other person his full humanity.

The poem ends with an ironic appeal to a feature that all men presumably share:

Despues de tantos siglos sólo comprende el hombre  
lo que en sí, repetido, experimenta:  
esa misma manera de mear.

Brines reduces the universality of (male) human experience to its most basic element: the only thing all men have in common is the way they urinate. Once

<sup>14</sup> There are two related dangers in the notion of a distinctive homosexual perspective. The first is the implication that the heterosexual perspective is somehow “universal” by contrast. The second is the idea that homosexuality can be identified with a single point of view.

<sup>15</sup> Compare Cernuda’s “El escándalo,” discussed in Chapter 6 of this book.

again, this experience, shared by both heterosexual and homosexual men, is defined in exclusively masculine terms, since the poet chooses a sign of anatomical difference in order to emphasize what all men (as opposed to women) understand.

The existentialist approach that sees only abstract philosophical issues is not adequate for a text like "Exabrupto." Nantell's commentary, for instance, ignores the particular situation occurring in the text in order to read it as a commentary on "Being": "In 'Exabrupto'... the pessimistic, nihilistic first-person speaker desires to know the meaning of Being. Ultimately, what he comes to know is its inverse: the meaninglessness of existence. In the final analysis, the poet's own ontological inquiry in this poem leads him to a succinct formula summarizing the absurdity of existence" ("Modos de ser" 45). It is true that Brines' existentialism is evident in *Insistencias en Luzbel*, but in this case the existentialist reading has the effect of erasing Brines' preoccupation with sexual difference, substituting a rather abstract paraphrase that bears little relation to the particulars of the text.

My emphasis on those poems that raise the issue of gender and sexual difference would seem to slight the philosophical meditation on the problem of human existence that other critics have emphasized in their readings of Brines' work. I would argue, nevertheless, that the poet's treatment of themes such as the passage of time is also inflected by his distinctively homoerotic vision. This theme typically finds expression through a contrast between youth and age: the poet gazes at a younger man or at a group of such men and imaginatively exchanges places with them. This is the scenario in "Versos épicos," cited above, in "Mere Road," one of Brines' best known poems, and in numerous other texts. "Madrigal con epigrama" depicts a dialogue between the speaker and a younger man:

Te alejas, ríes. Me preguntas  
lo que daría yo por tener hoy tus años.

Mira, muchacho, aquello que está hecho  
ya no se puede deshacer.

Mas dime, ¿qué darías  
por saber, con certeza,  
que habrá de ser el tiempo  
benigno para ti,  
y llegar tú a mi edad?

Verías a un muchacho malicioso  
que ríe al preguntarte si le envidias  
los años tan hermosos que él te ofrece.

(229)

The younger man taunts the speaker, who presumably desires but cannot be desired in turn. While time is irreversible – "aquello que está hecho / ya no se

puede deshacer” – the roles of the two men are interchangeable, since the younger man will find himself in an identical situation in the future.<sup>16</sup>

In the final analysis, it is not possible or even desirable to separate Brines’ treatment of sexuality from his philosophical meditations on death and time. “Con quién haré el amor,” one of Brines’ most accomplished short poems, demonstrates the inseparability of sexual and existential themes:

En este vaso de ginebra bebo  
 los tapiados minutos de la noche,  
 la aridez de la música, y el ácido  
 deseo de la carne. Sólo existe,  
 donde el hielo se ausenta, cristalino  
 licor y miedo de la soledad.  
 Esta noche no habrá la mercenaria  
 compañía, ni gestos de aparente  
 calor en un tibio deseo. Lejos  
 está mi casa hoy, llegaré a ella  
 en la desierta luz de madrugada,  
 desnudaré mi cuerpo, y en las sombras  
 he de yacer con el estéril tiempo.

(161)

The speaker contrasts the anonymous and mercenary sexual encounters that are typical of his nights with the solitary experience of time that he will suffer on this particular occasion. At the same time, however, he depicts this very experience in sexual terms: he undresses in order to sleep with “el estéril tiempo.” The contrast, then, is between two sorts of sexual acts, both equally unappealing and unproductive. Since both “mercenary company” and solitude are depicted in similarly negative terms, the contrast between them becomes less consequential: prostitution, apparently negated, actually serves as a metaphor for the speaker’s experience of time. The only real difference between the two alternatives is that prostitution gives the illusion of warmth – “gestos de aparente / calor en un tibio deseo” – while the speaker’s solitude offers no such false comfort.

To read Francisco Brines as a gay poet is to dissociate him from the ideology of humanist universalism with which he has so often been identified. At first glance this approach might seem counterintuitive, given the poet’s own stake in this ideology. His poetry is steeped in the humanist rhetoric of the 1950s and 1960s, and he consistently attempts to present his experience in generic rather

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<sup>16</sup> Compare Cernuda’s “La sombra,” in which the poet’s lost youth is metaphorically identified with a young male lover:

Al despertar de un sueño, buscas  
 Tu juventud, como si fuera el cuerpo  
 Del camarada que durmiese  
 A tu lado y que al alba no encuentras.

(267)

than individual terms. Brines' existentialist universalism, nevertheless, is necessarily partial and incomplete: his view of the subject is ultimately defined and limited by his own particular viewpoint. In the first place, his vision of humanity is androcentric to the point of misogyny. Secondly, his understanding of sexuality is at odds with the heterosexual norm. The result is that he constructs the "universal" human subject in his own image, in terms both homosocial and homosexual. Brines' efforts to transcend the particularity of his own experience in order to speak with a more universal voice, then, are destined to fail. Close attention to this failure, nevertheless, will lead to a much more productive reading of his work, rescuing him from the bland asexuality of the humanist closet. Any critical interpretation that ignores Brines' treatment of gender and sexual difference will ultimately fail to account for the distinctiveness of his poetic achievement.

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