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La noche de las cien cabezas and Nocturno de los catorce: Surrealistic Visions of Ramon J. Sender

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The artistic mode labelled "surrealism" by André Breton maintains that the subconscious mind not only has the ability to create new ideas but that it is also responsible for the external manifestations of expression. Attempting to break away from the Romantic glorification of the past, surrealism encourages the complete liberation of the mind. Although the movement originally made an attempt to change the order of rational control in French art, Spain adds another dimension to the characteristics of surrealism: a darker, more pessimistic interpretation of reality. Ramón J. Sender, one of the most prolific and intuitive writers of the twentieth century, gives a surrealistic twist to the theme of dehumanized identity. The world of the incongruous, exemplified through plot, psychology and symbolism, clearly delineates this many-faceted theme.

The novels *La noche de las cien cabezas*, 1934, and *Nocturno de los catorce*, 1969, feature many elements particular to Spanish surrealism. Renato Poggioli has observed "...that the primary characteristic of surrealism is internal: the cultivation of dream states, stream of consciousness, and psychic violence of all types."¹ In conformity with these characteristics, Sender's works have a subjective effect upon the reader, who is led into an uncanny world of incongruity and absurdity, an environment no longer ruled by logic. Within this context, Freudian psychoanalysis and dream psychology become integral parts of the artistic application of dream states and hallucinations, and may even employ occultism and the supernatural in order to project its more distorted forms. Consequently, subjectivity, free association and the subconscious become essential artistic tools for creation within the boundaries of the surrealistic mode. In an attempt to understand the mysteries of obscure reality, Sender explores the labyrinths of the human psyche in *La noche* and *Nocturno*.

The incongruous and often grotesque elements of *La noche* clearly illustrate the surrealistic tendencies of Sender's creative process. The unusual events which shape the novel often defy reason by giving life to a traditionally dead world. In *The Surrealist Mode in Spanish Literature*, Paul Ilie comments that surrealism often includes a denial of what is usually considered contradictory or paradoxical in man's experience. In the case of this novel, death and insanity are the means by which the dark reality of life may be explained. *La noche* introduces a protagonist who, only through suffering and alienation, begins to understand the more dismal aspects of life. Evaristo el Rano, a frog catcher by occupation, has lost his hold on the frog market because the wife of a socialist leader has established her own business, basically for her own amusement. Suddenly Evaristo must face the fear he has hid-

den for many years—that of being forced from his comfortable, self-sufficient role into a deprived and starved existence, "...poco a poco perdiendo contacto con las gentes."² He wanders about the streets, unemployed and alone until he meets a down-and-out metallurgist with whom he trades opinions and stories. The two crawl into a cemetery crypt seeking warmth only to freeze to death outside the cold city of Madrid. The shadows of the dead men, after the weather has become colder, begin to exchange words as they discover a new sense of life being born into them. A mule then kicks an uncovered skull, bringing to life the natural elements of the cemetery. Finally, a hurricane-like storm sweeps the city, and a cold, wet whirlwind passes through the cemetery, dropping among other objects one-hundred revived, severed heads which discuss the problems and perspectives of life. Different social classes, occupations and attitudes continue to be introduced and revived throughout the novel until gods intervene to resolve the pessimistic discussion of reality. When daylight reappears a few days later, "la verdadera amanecer," the voices begin to fade as another, living human summarizes the resolution. The absurd change of natural order from life to death and back to life embraces a special facet of surrealism, that of using the unexpected to shock the reader into a new sense of reality.

The one-hundred heads exemplify Gongoristic dehumanization, a realm of Spanish surrealism "...characterized by absurdity, deformation and nightmarish mood."³ They not only provide an esperpentic mirror-image of society but also allow Sender's unconscious imagination to be unchained in the form of grotesque images. The severed heads, along with newspapers, handbags, books and train schedules to heaven, are hurled through the air by the whirlwind and then dropped on the cemetery lawn. They hop frantically about, attempting to make themselves heard. Within their conversations, the heads' "...chaotic interruptions and disjointed or repetitive phrases appear as incongruous elements."⁴ Even though the personalities are introduced by name or title, they interrupt each other with unrelated comments. "Gritaron aquí y allá: —¡El loco! —¡El cenizo! —¡El suicida!" (p. 115). Allegorically, the group of bloody heads represents the confusion and suffering of mankind, a microcosm of human imperfection.

Varias cabezas terriblemente inflamadas fueron llegando despacio y quedaron flotando largo tiempo sobre el cementerio. Subían, bajaban, como globos. Permanecían silenciosas sin expresión. De vez en cuando entreabrían los labios y gemían. No se podía advertir a primera vista cuales eran sus sufrimientos. Los ojos carecían de vida. No se les podía ver sino la cornea (p. 72).

The victims continue to suffer within this dark purgatory as they relive their sins and frustrations. The reader learns of a woman who murdered her daughter only to face her again in this bizarre afterlife. He also meets stabbed lovers, gangsters and the wretched "malvado" who states, "Yo no soy nadie. ¿Quiere saber dónde estoy? Mire arriba. Vea ese gas denso y negro. Ese es mi gas" (p. 131). Within their conversations the heads analyze the dehumanization of earthly life and the lost identity of the human ego. At the same time, they reveal the ignorance and cruelty of their own personalities. Ironically, these negative characteristics eventually overshadow all the other unnatural events in the novel.

Within Sender's allegorical presentation of society in *La noche*, his use of symbols frequently adheres to the unexpected and paradoxical view of reality found in surrealism. Evaristo el Rano, whose name symbolizes both mental and physical metamorphoses, is dehumanized by an animal guise. "In psychological terms, the mask transforms its wearer into an archetypal image."⁵ Through the process of death and self-realization, Evaristo is changed from an abandoned, disillusioned soul into an accepted member among a group of philosophers. Many other symbols become paradoxical or contradictory in meaning, such as the heads and skulls themselves. The silent dead are brought back to life to re-examine values, the whirlwind obscures the direction of time, the black smoke and fog create rather than destroy. Darkness is given power over light. "Sabía ya que en el principio fue la noche, la sombra. Que al fin la sombra vivirá siempre" (p. 26). The mule crushes the skull of death to extract the black truth from the bowels of the earth. A red moon, peering from behind the dark smoke, is reflected in the yellow river. "La última luna de la era cristiana" appears not only in reference to the dead, but also in juxtaposition to the holy creation. It may be the dreaded symbol of the unknown, for the scenario of the cemetery is always given Dante's Stygian touch. The whirlwind embodies another sense of the divine, for it frequently drops three heads at a time, just as the divine mediator, the laurel tree, bends to shade the graves with three myriads of leaves. Aesthetic and moral control become obsolete as new powers determine the character of this strange, new world. The heads pray to the moon, calling it "el oso blanco." This may refer to Arcas, or the constellation "Little Bear," the protective entity usually associated with the formation of Ursa Major.⁶ Arcas carries the stone of the innermost being, represented in the novel by headstones and the granite dolmen. Jung asserts that man's soul is akin to stones in their representation of the mind at its "...farthest remove from emotions, feelings, fantasies and discursive thinking of ego-consciousness."⁷ The one hundred personalities view death, perhaps through stones, as their escape from mortal pain. The conscience, however, enters at the end of the novel to resolve the socio-philosophical conflict. Portrayed as two opposing gods, black and white, bad and good, the superego must judge the degree of life's futility. The black god, a grotesque figure composed of one thousand waving tentacles, paints a bleak yet realistic picture of human morality as he continues to emphasize the importance of libidinous instincts. This surrealistic deity with gaseous smoke arms and a fiery tuft of hair is what Kayser identifies as the combination of the human and non-human in caricature.⁸ The white god, a traditional representative of "good," hypocritically ignores the problem by promising love and peace to his followers. Even the god of universal love and reality, Pánfilo, is presented as "el bobo" despite his predictions of "la venida del apocalipsis y la vida eterna" (p. 137). The violent and chaotic black god chases away his enemy and returns to the dark unknown as the bloody air of the cemetery begins to clear.

Focusing more closely upon the subjective, intrinsic level of man's experience, *Nocturno* embraces the surrealistic mode with more fervor than does *La noche*. Ramón Sender, even in the external structure of the novel, reveals a deeply personal yet bizarre treatment of human psychology. The protagonist presents personal reflections, conversations and even hallucinations in a first person narrative manner, recording his ideas for the reader through automatism. "The so-called 'stream-

of-consciousness' technique creates the illusion of a 'you are there' timelessness, but has the possible disadvantage of incoherency. There is a deliberate fusion of past, present and future into one great expanding present."⁹ Sender emphasizes the psychic unity of *Nocturno* by combining the past and present in both thought and action to smoothly coordinate the narrator's vision with the experiences of the other characters.

The confusion of time, space and narrative voice, although expressed in a syntactically logical manner, allows the novelist to portray Pedro's uncontrollable psychological manifestations in a surrealistic way. Struggling to rediscover the dimensions of reality, Pedro attempts to analyze and understand his paranoia while he serves as mediator-narrator for fourteen disturbed phantoms. Although he reminds the reader from time to time that the suicide victims are part of "una defensa laberíntica y compleja,"¹⁰ Pedro's matter-of-fact narrative tone makes abnormal occurrences seem like part of his everyday life. "Alone" in his friend Mu-mu's house, Pedro enjoys the winter with his thoughts, a cat, and the fourteen ghosts. Each phantasmagoric character, in and out of turn, discusses life and philosophy as Pedro describes, almost in asides, the situations which led up to the individual's suicide. At times he delineates the victim's life history in detail, at others, he simply makes a character analysis. All of the characters are Hispanic except for Helen Wilkerson and Ernest Hemingway. The methods of suicide include shooting, suffocation, hanging and jumping whereas the motives are a bit more varied. Yet what becomes so unusually incongruent is the portrayal of the characters themselves, for their emotions and experiences allow the reader to identify with their struggle. Suicide is presented as the average man's answer to suffering. This contradiction of moral rationality is in itself surrealistic, for "...the impersonality of metropolitan life brings up the question of human and inhuman behavior."¹¹ Woven, then, between the suicide victims' presentations are Pedro's ramblings and rationalizations. The death of Mu-mu's husband Charlie, also by suicide, obsesses Pedro as he pumps his guests for any information pertaining to motive. His mind jumps through different dimensions of time, from his childhood to the present, and even to a time when he helps a neighbor bury her brother's decomposed corpse. The guests' dream-like presence, real or imagined, unquestionably controls the narrator's psychological energy: "A veces el recuerdo de una persona muerta nos acompaña todo un día o noche. La oímos hablar a nuestro lado, influir en nuestras decisiones" (p. 16). The absurd beings frequently color the paranoid psychotic's vision of reality. Even within the confines of his own home Pedro is chased by wild beasts and Indians who leave blood and excrement on his rugs, converting his abode into a jungle, the symbol of Pedro's subconscious. Pedro struggles with his inner loneliness and the creatures which haunt him only to discover, in the end, that they are still at his heels.

Relating the surrealistic elements of *Nocturno* to Freudian theory, the reader is challenged by the absurd world created by Pedro and the phantoms. Each attempts to escape from reality by overstepping the traditional boundaries of time, space and reason. Instead of struggling for life, the fourteen guests have expressed thanatos, the death-wish, and are able to speak only as ghosts. According to Louis I. Dublin, "...since existence is rarely free from periods of intense stress, many seek the relief afforded by the grave."¹² However, in the case of the personalities, death has ex-

tended the power of greed and self-pity. Some commit suicide because they have been betrayed by a lover, others attempt to escape from wrong decisions and mistakes, and one, Hemingway, dies to escape the suffering caused by life's contradictions. Life no longer provides a desirable niche, therefore an ending must be created. Even Pedro's shaky sense of perception understands that suicide is "...la prolongación de la angustia en alguna dirección que no sabemos." (p. 98). The guests employed their own illusion or *trompe l'oeil* in life, creating a world that would never exist under traditional circumstances. After discussing how "R.I.P." died because he discovered the absence of freedom in life, Pedro defines the powers assumed by suicide victims. "Igual que los amigos a quienes se permitió el lujo de ser su propio juez y su propio reo y su propio verdugo (los tres en una sola persona y al mismo tiempo) No es admirable?" (p. 198).

Pedro witnesses the way in which human beings reject the problems of everyday life, yet he permits his own subconscious to monitor his thoughts. According to Freud, the voyage or journey taken by each character into the "other world" embodies a death symbol. In the case of Pedro's paranoia, however, insanity may represent the most viable solution.

No digo que siempre haya estado en la realidad. Si alguien me acusa de estar en las nubes no me ofendo. Tal vez tiene razón, pero no hay que olvidar que es en las nubes donde se engendra al rayo, como he dicho otras veces. Por otra parte, ¿hay alguien que pueda decir en que consiste la famosa realidad? Yo confieso que no. Tampoco sabes tú, lector (p. 17).

Pedro's visions, which he terms "sueños paradisiacos," externalize his fears of the past, present and future. Through his fear of the pursuing beasts and Indians, Pedro exhibits what Freud labels "paraphrenia," a condition developed when a subject sets up a strong defense system to protect himself from the fear of life itself, of the life which he must confront and share with many others. Although Pedro justifies his condition by emphasizing that the Indians are products of a demoralized society and that they prove his own existence, the suicide victims believe that Pedro does not understand the need for physical escape: "—Todos ustedes, digo los vivos, no producen más que eso: palabras. Pero no ven nada" (p. 148).

The symbols of *Nocturno*, whether representative of the conscious mind or of unconscious manifestations, reveal the most important elements of Sender's theme of escape. The suicide victims, in their discussions of life, equate the natural laws of life to game strategies. Chess and billiards, for example, represent the interaction of physical chance with subliminal perception. Yet within this paradigm the ghosts commit the "black and white" fallacy of believing that life consists mainly of two poles: success and failure, or life and death. Because mediating between the two presents a formidable struggle, the spirits often generalize difficult concepts into unusual symbols. "C₂" is Charlie after death, the swastika becomes the emblem of perfection, flute and piano music represent the chaos of life: "notas al azar sin orden armónico." Even the cat Gerineldo, an image of deistic power and knowledge, embodies the ultimate symbol of transcendence to the quasi-human characters.

The labyrinth of Pedro's subconscious may be explained by both Freudian and

Jungian symbolism. "We should understand that dream symbols are for the most part manifestations of a psyche that is beyond the control of the conscious mind."¹³ The Indians who pursue Pedro represent his id, or "primitive side," a psychological disturbance which he attempts to suppress. "Iban medio desnudos, cubiertos sólo con algunos andrajos y llevaban años sin afeitarse ni cortarse el pelo, de modo que su apariencia no era mejor que la de las bestias, aunque podían moverse y caminar en dos pies como el australopiteco erecto" (p. 156). The beasts which follow him bawl and moan in pain, often trying to rise from crouching positions. This struggle of the dying beasts is also man's fight for survival as he combats physical and mental weakness. Pedro expresses his own fear of debility, thinking, "...si continuó aquí va a llegar un momento en que seré tan débil como esas pobre bestias" (p. 158). The beasts that lie in wait for him at home, however, are described as being much angrier and more dangerous. These oxen, bulls, buffalo, lions and even boxer dogs escape from the walls and carpets to corner Pedro in his living room. Freud connects the vision of animals to the symbol of people; Pedro fears not only himself but also the multitude of the real world. The narrator finds especially frustrating the minotaur-like bison with its body of a man and head of a bull. Similar to the Marathonian bull killed by Theseus in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Pedro's imaginary bull feeds on human flesh. According to mythology, the minotaur was fed fourteen people as a tribute from Athens.¹⁴ In *Nocturno*, Pedro's beast becomes the destructive part of life found to be unbearable by the fourteen guests. Thus, they choose death over life. Pedro dreams or hallucinates about another symbol of death, that of the burial of the mysterious woman's brother. The sister, who reinforces the idea of timelessness in the novel, wears a watchband without any time-keeping device. Her dead brother, a naked, stiff body, is one of the symbols of death in Freudian psychology. Although Pedro never directly contemplates suicide during the course of events described in the novel, he is constantly faced with the fine line between life and death, fantasy and reality.

In *La noche* and *Nocturno*, Ramón Sender fuses psychological phenomena with the world of the absurd to give his novels a distinctly surrealist quality. Spanish surrealism not only carries the observer beyond the world of the uncanny, but also focuses his emotions upon the distortion of ordinary life projected through hallucinations and dreams. The external, rational world is transformed and redefined by both Evaristo el Rano and Pedro, the one hundred heads and the fourteen disturbed spirits. These works directly reflect surrealist tendencies toward the grotesque as they portray contradictory and unexplained occurrences through subconscious manifestation. For Evaristo, the resurrected cemetery magnifies the pain of dehumanization. For Pedro, a paranoid psychotic, an imaginary world full of ghosts and hunters offers a bizarre sense of comfort as he becomes more alienated from reality. According to Salvador Dalí, "Paranoia has the permanence and the analytical hardness of granite. The quicksands of automatism and dreams vanish upon awakening. But the rocks of the imagination still remain."¹⁵ In relation to the surrealist realm of Sender's imagination, Freudian psychoanalytic theory would suggest that the cemetery has been condensed into a microcosm of society whereas the house of phantoms is a displacement of fear into escape.¹⁶ Although *La noche* is

traditionally considered to be an allegory and *Nocturno*, at first glance, is a description of modern psycho-social problems, Ramón Sender's imagination has captured much more. Much like the dark side of the moon, man's subconscious remains largely unexplored and directly unseen, yet its existence is unquestionable.

NOTES

¹Paul Ilie, *The Surrealist Mode in Spanish Literature* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1968), p. 2.

²Ramón Sender, *La noche de las cien cabezas* (Madrid: Imprenta de Juan Pueyo, 1934), p. 6. All other references to this edition are noted in the text parenthetically.

³Ilie, p.

⁴Mary Margaret O'Brien, *Fantasy in the Fiction of Ramón Sender*, Diss., Boulder 1970 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1970), p. 248.

⁵Carl C. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1964), p. 263.

⁶J. E. Zimmerman, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 28.

⁷Jung, p. 224.

⁸Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 24.

⁹Diana Lee Morelli, *The Sense of Time in the Fiction of Ramón Sender*, Diss., Seattle 1967 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1967), p. 17.

¹⁰Ramón Sender, *Nocturno de los catorce* (Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 1969), p. 190. All other references to this edition are noted in the text parenthetically.

¹¹Ilie, p. 8.

¹²Louis I. Dublin, *Suicide: A Sociological and Statistical Study* (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1963), p. 5

¹³Jung, p. 53.

¹⁴Zimmerman, p. 168.

¹⁵Ilie, p. 114.

¹⁶Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek, *Psychoanalysis and Literature* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1964), p. 127.