

HERACLITUS, CERNUDA, AND MR ELIOT¹

In a previous, co-written essay detailing the influence of Heraclitus on Luis Cernuda (Almodóvar-Márquez, 1988), passages in the latter's poetry clearly evidencing the pre-Socratic's thought appear catalogued. Fire as underlying origin and principle, a harmony fusing opposites, and the contradiction between being and movement were among those philosophical ideas leaving their mark on *La realidad y el deseo*. A more recent, co-written essay (Márquez-Zambrano, 1993) examines the influence of Heraclitus on T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. This second study argues that Heraclitus's ideas concerning time and eternity serve as organizing elements in the structure of *Four Quartets* and that the antithetical, paradox-infused style of the philosopher had left its mark on Eliot's poetry. In related, shared imagery, Eliot makes use of such familiar, Heraclitus-inspired motifs as the river, while other images, such as the way that rises and falls or the surgeon who cures by wounding, stand singular.

Eliot could read the surviving fragments of Heraclitus's philosophy in the original; his knowledge of Ancient Greek was more than sufficient to do so. Cernuda, on the other hand, needed intermediaries for this reading. The Spanish poet's conscious, programmatic self-insertion in a European tradition of letters finds its expression in *Historial de un libro*, where Cernuda details explicitly the sources of his poetry. When referring to works written in languages he did not know, the poet's candid self-revealing includes mention of specific translations (Cernuda, 1975: 934):

¹I am very grateful to Jefferey Simons for translating this article into English.

No sería justo si no mencionase ahora, después de indicar mi cansancio entonces de la lectura, cómo en Mount Holyoke hice una en extremo reveladora: la de Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ayudado por una traducción inglesa de los mismos textos; más tarde, ya viviendo en México, leería también la obra de Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*; los fragmentos de filosofía presocrática que en una y otra obra conocí, sobre todo, quizá, los de Heráclito, me parecieron lo más profundo y poético que encontrara en filosofía.

Heraclitus is among the most significant sources in Cernuda's three final volumes of poetry, and the intermediaries of influence seem firmly established. F. Ortiz (1985: 99) has suggested that Cernuda's interest in Frazer and Heraclitus likely owes to Eliot's having cited them in the notes to his work. This likelihood would not in itself contradict Cernuda's abovequoted affirmations concerning his reading the pre-Socratics while at Mount Holyoke. General chronology confirms the poet's words, for Cernuda's stay at Mount Holyoke lasted from 1947 to 1949, and the volumes in which the influence of Heraclitus is most perceptible date from these and subsequent years: *Vivir sin estar viviendo* (1944-1949), *Con las horas contadas* (1950-1956), and *Desolación de la Quimera* (1956-1962).

Two poems appearing in *Vivir sin estar viviendo*, however, bear the clear stamp of Heraclitus and yet were composed before 1947 — prior, that is, to Cernuda's reading the early Greeks during his stay in Massachusetts. The poems in question are "La escarcha" (dated 27 December 1944; revised 13 January 1945), which alludes to originary fire, and "Otras ruinas" (dated 5 January 1946), where the contraries scarcity/satiety, in clear allusion to Heraclitus's fragment 22B 67, stand out:

La carencia que nunca pudo esperar hartura,
 La saciedad que nunca quiso guardar templanza;
 Como dos enemigos frente a frente,
 Hambre y frío de una parte, soberbia y avaricia de la otra. . . .

How might one explain the influence of Heraclitus on these poems written before the poet's arrival in the United States and, therefore, previous to his recorded reading of the pre-Socratics? Did Cernuda first read the fragments of Heraclitus while at Mount Holyoke, and were the cited German and English texts his only intermediaries?

From 1943 to 1947 Cernuda lived in England, first in Cambridge and later in London, where he sought to contact with and move in literary and artistic circles. He read attentively contemporary English poetry and,

in an interview published in 1945 (Cernuda, 1975: 1449), affirmed in this regard:

Creo que Eliot es sin duda el más grande de todos [los poetas ingleses de la actualidad] y uno de los grandes poetas del mundo. Especialmente su última obra, [*Cuatro Cuartetos (Four Quartets)*] es de una trascendencia extraordinaria y es en ella donde Eliot se ha logrado mejor desde el punto de vista del lenguaje. ¡Qué exactitud y qué precisión el el concepto!

Cernuda, then, had doubtless read *Four Quartets* by 1945, and this fact may yield the key to the chronological puzzle, for Eliot placed two Greek epigraphs at the outset of his work, both fragments of Heraclitus, one fragment 22B 60:

ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὤστῃ.

The influence of Heraclitus is even greater in *Four Quartets* than in Cernuda's final three volumes. In the midst of his text, Eliot translates into English the very fragment above, as evident in "Dry Salvages" 129 (FQ):

And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back. Cernuda, in turn, incorporates the translation of the same fragment into the last stanza of "El amante divaga" (*Con las horas contadas*):

El camino que sube
Y el camino que baja
Uno y lo mismo son; y mi deseo
Es que al fin de uno y de otro,
Con odio o con amor, con olvido o memoria,
Tu existir esté allí, mi infierno y paraíso.

As Cernuda's stanza acknowledges textually the reading of Heraclitus in translation, why does the poet hide the fact that he first encountered the pre-Socratic in Eliot and not, as claimed, in English and German translations read during his stay at Mount Holyoke? The unmistakable traces of Heraclitus in poems written in England imply reading, either in Eliot or some other modern translation, previous to the poet's departure for America. One suspects that Cernuda, in not revealing Eliot's intermediary role, offers an incomplete record of his initial contact with and assimilation of Heraclitus. In reasoned speculation, one also suspects that Cernuda was aware of this incompleteness, for the admiration Cernuda so copiously professed for Eliot during his years in England had turned to hatred when the poet wrote *Historial de un libro* (1958).

The cause of this radical shift lies in Eliot's refusal to publish several of Cernuda's poems, translated into English by the poet's friend and

noted Hispanist E. Wilson, in the prestigious review *The Criterion*. After reading the poems, Eliot wrote to Wilson on 31 March 1947 and politely declined to accept them. Several years later, in the essay "Goethe y Mr. Eliot" (1959), Cernuda vigorously attacks the Anglo-American poet under the pretext of defending Goethe. *Four Quartets*, previously viewed with unbridled admiration, appears in this essay demoted to the condition of mere Christian belief oozing with "a Puritan temperament."²

Cernuda, in conclusion, readily acknowledges the intermediaries bringing him into contact with the fragments of Heraclitus during his stay in the United States, yet he neglects Eliot's prior role in doing the same during his years in England. F. Ortiz posits that Cernuda's interest in Heraclitus may well owe to the notes Eliot attached to his own work. This initial contact likely led Cernuda to read, while still in England, at least some fragments in translation, however much this reading would later deepen at Mount Holyoke. Cernuda's wounded pride, stung by the rejection of poems for publication in *The Criterion*, may explain the contradiction between the claims in *Historial de un libro* and the traces of Heraclitus in Cernuda's poetry written in England.

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²F. Ortiz (1985:102) seems not to perceive this evolution in Cernuda's attitude toward and judgment of Eliot, despite having cited and echoed Cernuda's calling Eliot, at the end of the former's stay in England, "ese Mr. Eliot" ["that Mr Eliot"].

Heráclito a T.S. Eliot", *Philologia Hispalensis* VIII: 55-70.

Ortiz F. (1985) "T. S. Eliot en Cernuda", *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*.
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