

CIENFUEGOS AND THE POETIC PROJECTION OF «NICASIO»

Cienfuegos y la proyección poética de «Nicasio»

Monroe Z. HAFTER
University of Michigan

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RESUMEN: El artículo propone la lectura de la poesía lírica de Cienfuegos a partir de la existencia de dos niveles en su discurso, público y privado, similares a los que es posible diferenciar en su obra dramática y que el autor cultiva con diferentes propósitos. Se trata de observar cómo Cienfuegos escribe su poesía con un distanciamiento personal que, no obstante, refleja su propia experiencia vital.

Palabras clave: Cienfuegos, poesía lírica, sujeto lírico, siglo XVIII, prerromanticismo.

ABSTRACT: This article proposes a reading of Cienfuegos' lyric poetry based on the existence of two levels of discourse, public and private, similar to the ones that can be differentiated in his plays and that the author cultivates with different purposes in mind. It is observed that Cienfuegos wrote his poetry from a personal distance which nonetheless reflects his own life experience.

Key words: Cienfuegos, lyric poetry, lyrical subject, Eighteenth century, Pre-Romanticism.

As there is in all of us, two persons abide in Nicasio Álvarez de Cienfuegos. In his case, one of them is the young man ambitious to make a name in poetry, as well as the trained lawyer who sought to play a useful role in public life. The second is the inner self, tender and sentimental, which never forgot the hard work and teachings of his mother, widowed at the age of twenty-six, to gain her son a good education and to facilitate his advancement in a career. To be sure, when we read his verses it is difficult not to find in the poet's references to «Nicasio» the presence of a rather self-centered writer, even one somewhat pleased with himself. But this does not form a possible sketch of a «momma's boy», even taking into account the effusive dedication he wrote for her to his play, *Las hermanas generosas*. He seems aware of his extremely affectionate nature, for in the dedication of another play, *La Condesa de Castilla*, he forthrightly declares to the Marquesa de Fuerte-Híjar, his friend, patroness, and helpful critic, «en materia de cariños tengo una codicia insaciable». And should her respected husband ever inquire, he writes further, «¿quién nos amará más tierna y entrañablemente?» responde vuestra merced al instante: nuestro tierno amigo» —and then his signature, Nicasio Álvarez de Cienfuegos. Moreover, the deprecating tag does not accord well with the man who became the devoted friend of several prominent writers, all liberals, who used to congregate at the home of Meléndez Valdés (Coughlin, 6). Nor does it suit the generous-hearted public official who defied the intruder king, José Napoleon, and suffered, while desperately ill, exile and an early death.

I should like to suggest that one way of understanding this practice of self-reference in Cienfuegos's poetry is revealed by a characteristic of his plays that I have written about earlier: the significant and surprisingly frequent presence of silence. When no voices are heard on stage, the individual character's inner nature and perhaps true state of mind may come into view. Integrity and true sentiment manifest themselves when there are no words to shape a pose for the crowd's consumption. Away from the stage, a national figure or a social leader speaks in order to convince the public of some personal plan that he desires to advance. At such a time he is in a role like any actor, and he says what is required of him in that role. As a consequence we are not required to take his words as necessarily sincere expressions of personal beliefs any more than a theatre patron would believe the actor's speeches reflected that actor's own convictions.

What I mean to propose in the following pages is that Cienfuegos was pre-occupied in his poetry as well as his theatrical writing with the existence of two levels of speech, personal and public, reflecting the true, more intimate self and the external appearance, cultivated to fulfill certain purposes or to maintain one's position. Moreover, I believe that simply put, Cienfuegos seems to have written his poetry somewhat as an actor playing a role, and we know, moreover, that this dimension of activity was not remote from his experience. Cienfuegos had been an active participant in the theatricals staged at the home of the Marqués and Marquesa de Fuerte-Híjar. As an actor he knew that he could not become so

absorbed in the lines he was to deliver that he failed to be aware that he was to stand in this location on stage, not that one; that he was to look in this or that direction, and was to be holding one or another object in his hand. He had to be conscious of himself while acting as another person, and so I argue that he was always conscious of himself writing. Like any poet, he calculated the effect each phrase would produce, but in addition, he was aware of himself attempting to do so. He observed himself at the desk.

The first poem in José Luis Cano's invaluable collection, «Mi destino», provides some evidence of what I am proposing. It begins with the poetic voice first representing himself as a gentle but needy child, lying in his little cradle, visited by Cupid-like angels who may very well be subconscious manifestations of his beloved mother. They would endow him not with glory and money—the spurs to ambition and self-interest in the outside world—but with tender feelings. He manifests what is his ideal of himself, an «oficioso amigo» (v. 54), but also a person bearing an inner perfection that renders him «humano y compasivo». The same angels would grant him a destiny to continue loving (pp. 56-57). Thus the poet reveals the good opinion he holds of himself, a private person who does not always shield himself from public view.

The second poem, named «Mis transformaciones», appears to record an echo of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in that the so-called transformations that occur do so to encourage the success of love. Once again the poet disposes at the outset of impermanent «honores.../ ni montes de oro y plata», and any fleeting acclaim for bloody deeds of supposed heroism in the «templo de fama» (p. 57). Rather, he shall become first, a dew-sprinkled rose, who so delights his lady love that she consequently presses him against her breast. Then he becomes a playful butterfly and, finally, turns into a refreshing zephyr with «eternos giros». Yes, of course, the rose withers, the butterfly symbolizes flightiness, and the zephyr may blow itself out in another quarter of the sky. Still, they are regular features of the natural scene, behaving in their accustomed ways. When Cienfuegos portrays them here, he seeks to represent the enduring in Nature, in contrast to the temporal in society. One method he employs is to elevate his diction to unchanging, lofty classical norms of praise for the beloved lady (before admitting a jarring diminutive to describe her gentle repose): «sus mejillas de nácar... eternos giros... hibleos labios... umbrátil sueñecito» (p. 59). Once she realizes that his transformations, impermanence, have not affected his lasting devotion, as the concluding verse puts it, she will reciprocate his love, and «cesarán mis mudanzas» (p. 59). The verses may purport to tell a story, and in an established literary mode, but the protagonist is he himself.

Another kind of self-reference, a troubling one, appears in the lengthy poem, «El propósito», which treats of the poet's sharp suffering when Love, in the person of a certain «Laura», betrays him. Once again Cienfuegos situates his suffering of the other's fickleness against the backdrop of constancy, his choice in this instance being a tranquil, rustic hut, standing steadfast through the rhythmic changes of

Nature. Moreover, he opens his lament by addressing the shelter in a latin form, «¡Salve, mi querido albergue!» as if to emphasize the priority of a classical standard of virtuous living and the hoped-for elegance of his verse.

The entire poem is a marvelous exposition of his love for the lady, his regret and anger at her betrayal, his abandonment of love, and then his yearning to have her love return to him. In this context he appears to mock the foolishness and inexperience that he allowed to bring him to so unhappy an impasse. But in truth he respects his openness to love even if she deceived him, and thus he can write of *Amor*: «Le ví; resistí; no pude... / ¡Es tan tiernecita mi alma! / Jura no amar cada día, / y cada día más ama» (p. 71). At the end, Cienfuegos does not write while awash in self-pity. Love renders him compassionate, and he manifests a generous heart, a reflection of an inner and decent self. Nevertheless, while respecting his capacity for love, he resolves not to repeat the error.

An interesting confirmation of what I have described can be found in the poet's «Oda» to an actress who played the role of «Nice» in an amateur theatrical performed in a private home. So expressive was the actress in representing Nice's grief, when left behind by her beloved Tirsis, that Cienfuegos specifically declares (vv. 73-78, p. 94) that the tender and generous actress, as if a stand-in for the poet, communicated the fire in her heart to every person in the audience. The basis of her character's grief lay in the abandonment by Tirsis who preferred to satisfy his desire for glory and wealth, «esa quimera / que la ambición te inspira» (p. 93). The author concludes his ode pouring wishes for good fortune on the heroine in words that capture so much of what I have represented as Cienfuegos's loving nature:

...Y madre tierna,
hija obediente, enamorada esposa,
¡que de tu sombra al maternal abrigo
crezcan tus hijos, conservando eterna
adentro en su alma pura
la virtud de su madre en su ternura! (p. 94).

It is entirely just to call his poetry pre-Romantic, but I should like to suggest that he did not write that way because he was a pre-anything, but because he was Nicasio Álvarez de Cienfuegos.

Less sentimental but more sweeping, and far more universally embracing is the portrait of love as it envelops him in the lengthy poem, «A un amigo que dudaba de mi amistad» (pp. 121-127). In this poem Cienfuegos considers the affection between friends as of one piece with the harmony that holds the world together. It is no accident that in it we find the poet's first address to himself by name, as Nicasio, in the volume, because he tries to imagine what life would be

like if it did not hold love for him by others, or by him for others. So it is that he stands aside from himself to contemplate his own existence. The very moon sharply and lengthily berates his supposed indifference, as if the result of petty interests and selfishness (vv. 36-102). Then a life-affirming sun declares, «Todos los seres, tierra, firmamento / sobre vos derramando su influencia / os publican su amor y el vuestro piden», he writes (vv. 142-144). Occasionally his words verge on effusive excess, but this tendency is tempered by the conception of the universe he presents here. For this is a world with an *atmósfera* (vv. 152, 156), a word that even some ninety years after it first appeared in Spanish retained learned overtones of science or natural philosophy. Nor does immoderate emotion, although it is certainly intense, prevail in verses like the following:

...Allí, abrazado
del hombre el hombre, por la vez primera
toda la humanidad sintió en su pecho,
toda, toda su esencia, su alma entera,
hombre fue el hombre. Al sexual cariño
el brutal apetito rindió el cetro,
y dio principio a la piedad paterna,
al afecto filial, a la fraternal
caridad, y al deseo generoso
de amarse amando (vv. 174-183).

It is quite fitting that in a poem about friendship, where sharp, personal desire and self-interest can play no role, the love of one man for another receive such warm commendation.

Cienfuegos begins the personification of love a few lines below («Así el amor, perpetuo compañero / del tranquilo mortal...» [vv. 190-91]) culminating in a still later verse, «¡Ah! ¡triunfe, triunfe Amor!» (v. 210). The poet gives expression to the «sea of pleasure», created by thoughts of loving affection returned by the same friend, and with some calculation uses another scientific word: «mi pecho electrizado en sus amores!» (v. 217). Now the same bodily organ near the beginning of the poem was termed «el volcán de amor que me devora» (v. 18). The metaphor appears just as in one of his youthful poems, where he had written with equal zest that «mi pecho ardía / en un fiero volcán intolerable» (p. 184, vv. 115-116). From these citations I conclude that the ending verses, by contrast, have not given way to effusiveness and excess, but mark a more controlled presentation of emotion. Cienfuegos can now see himself as part of what Love expressly says of itself in the poem: «yo soy unión, la unión es vida, / la desunión es caos, muerte, nada» (vv. 108-109). And so, the relief, the deep satisfaction, the keen pleasure of devotion returned, all spur the writer to address his friend Muriel and other friends, in one verse, and to mark himself, the recipient of that love, Nicasio, in the next. Thus the private man is joined to the poetic self:

¡Oh Muriel! ¡oh amigos bienhechores!
 ¡Oh Nicasio feliz! ¡eternamente
 me hará vuestro cariño venturoso!
 Que la pobreza, el deshonor odioso,
 Cruel dolor, ignominiosa muerte
 me acometan; en medio del tormento
 bendeciré con lágrimas mi suerte;
 soy feliz, soy feliz, diré contento,
 amé, me amaron, me amarán por siempre (vv. 218-226).

Indeed, the poem ends on a note of exultation —«amé, me amaron, me amarán por siempre»— as Cienfuegos expresses not what was due him, as his mother's darling, but his relief and delight at being embraced by earthly bonds of friendship.

The evanescence of life affects the poet's outlook on love, a response not unexpected in one who was orphaned so young. He devotes his poem, «La desconfianza» (pp. 63-64) to just this element, and approaches the conclusion affirming, «Es el universo entero / una inconstancia perpetua: se muda todo; no hay nada / que firme y estable sea» (vv. 25-28). For the final two verses, he dares to hope that «Filis» will stand apart from the universal pattern and retain her love for him with «firmeza». He addresses a «Filis» again to the same purpose in «El fin del otoño» (pp. 79-81), for at the end of it, he notes that a grievous old age, with sadness and coldness, rapidly approaches. Hence his cry, «Amemos, amemos, Filis...» (v . 61).

Another poem centered on death and loss records a singular example of the author's fusing of the poetic character and his own story. I am referring to his «A un amigo en la muerte de un hermano» (pp. 136-40), in which the friend, Fernández, is enjoined to suspend the constant tears by his anxious son, Hipólito. The verses set out the grief and loneliness of the father, a devastating sense of bereavement, verses that Cienfuegos wrote surely reflecting his mourning for his mother. The young son would like to fill his father's emotional void. Citing his own loving mother and his own affection, Hipólito urges his father to find a new friend, and he concludes with the words, «y si por mí te guías / Nicasio en el amor será tu hermano» (vv. 150-51). Once again, but more directly, the poet when writing becomes a character in his own poem. And he does substantially the same thing in «Al señor Marqués de Fuertehíjar, en los días de su esposa» (pp. 153-157).

What I glean from my discussion of these poems of Cienfuegos is that without doubt he held a good opinion of himself, but his incorporation of that view of self into the poems corresponds more to his keen sense of intermingled roles in life. The creator of verse and the creator of self-image fuse.

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