

## The Paradises of Walter Béneke

JAMES MAHARG

In the only two works which Walter Béneke has written to date, the dramatist presents a particular philosophy of life which consists of a search for a social paradise which he calls in his first work *El paraíso de los imprudentes* which is itself the title of the drama, and in the second, *Funeral Home*, an alternative of which title could be "el paraíso de los prudentes." Both bear witness to two broad attitudes towards life which surround the central action where the protagonists do not enter into either paradise. Critics of Béneke's work have concerned themselves chiefly with *Funeral Home* and in particular its treatment of existentialist themes.<sup>1</sup> Yet criticism to the present has not discussed the second work as a continuation of the essential thematic postures of the first, nor measured *Funeral Home* as a second dramatic attempt to grapple with the basic dilemmas left unresolved in *El paraíso de los imprudentes*.

Each of Béneke's "paradises" is adapted to a certain age group and particular circumstances: a) Paris and existential youth, and b) the bourgeois "paradise" of a North American funeral home, involving people of a more mature age. In the one play, Carlos, a young Central American who refuses to compromise himself in this atmosphere, moves freely within this group of friends which symbolize "los imprudentes"; his character, however, remains rather undefined with regard to his philosophical convictions. In *Funeral Home*, the setting provides a somber, macabre background, where the characters make consistent attempts to convince themselves that they are happy within it. Here we find Carlos, the young student, grown old in the character of Bernardo. This personage displays the same characteristic as in Béneke's first play, with important variations which will be presently discussed. In this case, too, access to "paradise" is closed to him, and the work ends in his predictable suicide.

In Carlos there is a high degree of ideological oscillation in which various elements are juxtaposed in accordance with his particular crisis. Briefly, the elements which hold it together are: a vague bourgeois catholicism used in some-

what arbitrary fashion, without sufficient practical consequences and subsequent development (this is evident also in Bernardo in *Funeral Home*, still unjustified but with less idealistic pretensions, linked in this case to an acquired skepticism engendered by his more advanced age and painful past); a sense of social responsibility in which Carlos conceives of a duty to "amar a mi prójimo y servirle"<sup>2</sup> (this appears more conventional than pragmatic, attempting to portray perhaps a prototype of a socially conscious Latin American youth); some elements of existentialist philosophy also used in rather arbitrary fashion, in an attempt to portray the classic atmosphere in the Latin Quarter of Paris (later we shall see the implications of this philosophy in relating the character of Carlos to the other major characters in the play); a concept of liberty oriented towards a hypothetical and very "open-ended" future (Carlos' final rejection of marriage with Christianne, his most important decision in the play, is the best example). The concept of time, projected either to the past or the future, but not the present, will be developed later in Bernardo. It is precisely this aspect which separates Carlos from "el paraíso de los imprudentes."

Carlos' lover, Christianne, who personifies a thirst for feminine liberty, (quite clearly the character María in *Funeral Home*) is intellectual, sensual and in constant flight from bourgeois values, although she finally accepts the state of marriage. Not unexpectedly, she presents some inconsistencies. At the beginning she admires Carlos greatly, apparently for his intellectual strength. She accepts another's insinuation:

No has podido con él, ha estado siempre por encima de todo, en las discusiones, en los estudios, en el ascendiente sobre la gente de vuestro grupo. Lo has admirado siempre, sin darte cuenta que has llegado a imitarlo en muchas cosas (p. 30).

Later, however, it is discovered that the reasons for living with him were principally to escape her own philosophical anguish through his "simple" and "uncomplicated" character:

Venías de un mundo al que yo, sin conocer había renunciado; eras inocente y alegre y estabas limpio de angustia como nadie estaba en derredor mío desde hacía mucho tiempo. Fuiste mi guarida y reposé en ti. . . . Tú llenaste mis sentidos y viví con mis sentidos (p. 95).

At the end of the play Christianne appears somewhat bourgeoisie (she wants marriage) and the original bourgeois, Carlos, finally experiences existential anguish, yet he is accused by both Christianne and Jean of being bourgeois: "Naciste burgués, Carlos, y no servirías para otra cosa que para burgués" (p. 106). Yet Carlos affirms:

Lo que aborrezco es la monotonía, caer en el aburrimiento total y ver entrar en mí el hastío cursilón y pegajoso de los repetidos días hogareños. Necesito estar entre las cosas sin ligarme a ellas, sin saber que no hay alternativa, que no hay más remedio que permanecer allí . . . (p. 96).

This illustrates, then, perhaps one of the principal ideological inconsistencies of the play.

Jean appears as a well-delineated, tortured individual at the beginning. His absence of one year from the group is due entirely to Carlos' insistence on the futility of his ideals (Christianne, the Communist Party, Paris) which Carlos attacks in cynical fashion, urging escape:

... Viajando, dejándolo todo atrás y viviendo de prisa, aprovechando cada paisaje mediocre, cada conversación imbécil, cada rincón bajo el cielo (p. 10).

Huye, Jean. Huir es la solución de todos los problemas, la más elemental, la infalible (p. 11).

Inexplicably, however, Carlos exhibits a *volte face* shortly after Jean's departure.

Le debo más que a nadie en este mundo, que si otros me dieron la vida él [Jean] me enseñó que vivir tiene sentido. . . . Me hizo ver que era necesario justificarse ante el acontecer, aprovechando en el servicio del prójimo esta juventud maravillosa que es un paraíso con linderos (p. 46).

This change in attitude is not well motivated by the author, nor is the subsequent change in Jean into a skeptic and cynic, who nonetheless returns to marry Christianne.

Daniel and Clara provide a somewhat melodramatic subplot when it becomes obvious that Jean is their son. Yet the play would not have suffered by its exclusion as it appears as a concession to sentimentality. Nevertheless if Clara is a pathetic figure she is probably the best constructed of all; if, like María in *Funeral Home*, she feels the need to "live a lie" she nevertheless lives in the present, and really belongs to the "paraíso de los prudentes." Jacques, her *gigolo* lover is important in emphasizing the value of the erotic in Béneke's female characters, and in *Funeral Home* Jimmy (María's husband) is from an identical mold.

Béneke finally offers us two hypothetical solutions to the "imprudentes" in the character of Carlos. He can either marry Christianne, go to Central America and "cuidar al prójimo" (yet he does not want to compromise his future), or abandon Christianne in favor of a concept of liberty closely related to a vague but very open future. This is clearly a choice between responsibility and some degree of long-term commitment and a vague liberty projected towards an even more vague future with a minimum of personal compromise. Carlos chooses to abandon Christianne despite a sterile last minute change of mind, just as María abandons Bernardo in *Funeral Home*. The play ends with his words to the dead Clara "nos han dejado solos," but he remains alone because he chooses to do so. In enigmatic fashion, then, Carlos is astride both paradises.

Turning to *Funeral Home*, we encounter Carlos again, now called Bernardo, one who has opted for the first of the hypothetical solutions. There can be little doubt that Carlos/Bernardo are the same personality:

Carlos: Vámonos a América, a un pequeño país lleno de palmeras agobiado de belleza, rebosante de flores. Tú y yo solos (p. 111).

Bernardo: ¿Te gustan los países con sol, con playas inmensas y gente sufrida y humilde a la que puedes ayudar y servir? Iremos a uno, el más lejano de todos, el más pobre.<sup>3</sup>

Bernardo has the same attractive personality which we have seen in Carlos. Thus through the taxi-driver, Percy, we learn:

Según declararon en el juicio las enfermeras, tenía un don especial para hacerse adorar por sus pacientes (p. 295).

Likewise Percy informs us that Bernardo studied in Europe, met and married a girl whom he took to America. We now see a constant from the previous play, but in reverse: a mature person with an obscure but painful past, one who cannot face the future, which he rejects in the first scenes with María:

Atiéndame, hay algo que no puedo contarle, créame, algo horrible que usted no sabrá nunca y que no me permite, aunque lo deseara con toda mi alma, ofrecerle mi amistad más allá de esta noche (p. 270).

Now it is Bernardo's past which will not let him live, just as Carlos rejected Christianne thinking of the future. In both works Carlos/Bernardo, facing the possibility of losing the woman he loves, offers a dream-like future where in the first play the future will not be compromised, and the second, where the past will be forgotten. Each time the offer is rejected, and a change of heart comes too late to influence matters. In *El paraíso* Carlos is a witness to Clara's suicide; and in *Funeral Home*, Bernardo to his own.

The female protagonist, María, is herself a rebel, "una imprudente" which we see in her marriage to Jimmy the factory worker. This intellectual type of woman finds in the masculinity of her lovers a refuge against bourgeois conventions—like Christianne in the first play.

Yo estaba harta de los inteligentes. Ya en el colegio los más brillantes me preferían a las otras muchachas, pues además de encontrarme bonita "podían conversar conmigo." Después, en la Universidad, la misma historia, yo era el papel de moscas que atraía a los genios . . . (p. 264).

This feminine attraction for the more virile traits in men we find (as previously mentioned) in Clara, and in another way, as we shall see later, in Nancy, the undertaker's wife.

María, a more mature type, finally rejects this type of attraction as insufficient for her, and reverts to the intellectual type represented by Bernardo:

No sé qué hubiera hecho si alguien no viene esta noche a hablar conmigo, a decirme que existe algo más que las máquinas nuevas de la fábrica, y el fútbol, y el precio de las cosas (p. 263).

She rejects his initial offer of a short-term future, precisely because this sort of offer cannot begin to satisfy her needs. Nevertheless, she suffers a mercurial change and internally accepts Bernardo in the hope of achieving some long-term commitment. His return, however, ends in deepened disillusionment for her. Bernardo's past is revealed (his murder of his nymphomaniac wife, five years previously, finally motivated by her seduction of an infirm fifteen-year-old boy) and she finds herself unable to accept him. Her eventual change of mind comes too late to prevent his suicide, and here we have a basic contrast with *El paraíso*.

Carlos and Christianne are, generally, masters of their own situation. In *Funeral Home* María and Bernardo are subject to "destiny," or external forces which replace their initial control, and which usher in the final catastrophe.

A pertinent question is why Béneke should have chosen a funeral home as the setting for his second work. If, continuing our thesis, we view it as the focal point of the "paraíso de los prudentes," then the reason is clear. Nancy, the undertaker's wife, by a series of consciously repressed feelings and self-deceptions, builds her safe, tranquil, interior world as a defense against her confessed predilections:

Reflexione, míreme a mí, ¿Cree que tengo todo lo que deseo, que no me siento a veces insatisfecha y con ganas de rebelarme? ¿Usted cree que no me gustaría a veces engañar a mi marido . . . inventar un viajecito y por allá, en otra ciudad, en cualquier bar encontrarme con un muchacho fuerte y alegre, y tener una aventura de esas maravillosas . . .? Me enloquecería hacerlo (p. 274).

María and Bernardo, however, cannot live the deception of such a life.

*El Desconocido* (Bernardo): Para casi todos los humanos, y en casi todas las ocasiones la solución está en mentir o en mentirse.

*La Mujer* (María). (con vehemencia) ¡Si yo pudiera pertenecer a ese mundo!

*El Desconocido*: ¡y si pudiera yo! (p. 266)

It is obvious, then, that neither Bernardo nor María can enter into "el paraíso de los prudentes." In both works we are presented with protagonists who are incapable of coming to terms with the reality surrounding them. Basically, Béneke is presenting a vision—in the case of Carlos/Bernardo—of a man who is unable to acquire peace through self-deception (Bernardo) or self-negation (Carlos).

As we have attempted to show so far, *Funeral Home* is a continuation and development of the essential *problemática* of *El paraíso de los imprudentes*. Nevertheless, the chief reason why we cannot consider the one as the sequel to the other is that Béneke has not imposed on both works an internally cohesive structure within which to develop his thought, giving rise, occasionally, to a lack of interior logic in the development of the protagonists themselves.<sup>4</sup> Facets of character are presented, then left in the air: Carlos' religiosity (as previously mentioned) and Bernardo's vague Christianity (his reproaches of the American institution of the funeral parlor, and his final sarcastic letter asking to be buried with "cruces, sobre todo cruces, las más ricas"). Thematically, however, *Funeral Home* is more tightly organized than *El paraíso de los imprudentes* and constitutes one of the more positive aspects of the work.

Béneke has improved with his second play, and if our interpretation is correct, it is a second incursion into the concept of a social paradise. Characters are generally more recognizably human in construction and, thus, more readily credible, and this he achieves by a clear ability to handle dialogue effectively. Nonetheless, if a close examination of the play reveals a dramatist somewhat more in control of his medium, the frequent inconsistencies in thought lead us to concur with the

view that "en el último análisis el ideal de Bernardo resulta indeterminado y algo retórico,"<sup>5</sup> and to conclude that Béneke has yet to resolve the dilemma of his *paraísos*. Ultimately, due to some obvious contradictions in ideas and characterization, that dilemma rings false. Rather than a matter of losing or regaining, it is a problem of paradise adequately defined.

*University of Michigan*

## Notes

1. See for example Harvey Johnson, "The Existentialist Man's Problems in Two Representative Works of Spanish American Literature: Sábato's *El Túnel* and Béneke's *Funeral Home*," *Annals of the Southeastern Conference on Latin American Studies*, 3, No. 1 (March 1972), 94-104.

2. Walter Béneke, *El paraíso de los imprudentes* (San Salvador: Ministerio de Cultura, 1956), p. 70. Subsequent quotations from the play will be included within the text.

3. Walter Béneke, *Funeral Home*, in Solórzano, *El teatro hispanoamericano*, (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1964), p. 290. Subsequent quotations from the play will be included within the text.

4. Examining briefly two obvious examples of this in *Funeral Home*, in the audience's first encounter with Bernardo, the latter refers to María's husband as an *obrero*, which fact he could not possibly know since he was not on the stage when María disclosed it to *el Encargado* (Act I). Further, Nancy is inexplicably aware of María's wealthy family background and dissensions caused by her marriage to the socially inferior Jimmy which was confided to Bernardo alone in their previous conversation.

5. Donald Shaw, "A propósito de *Funeral Home* de Walter Béneke," *Cuadernos Hispano-americanos*, No. 211 (1967), 172.

David Viñas, novelista y dramaturgo argentino, autor de *Lisandro*, *Tupac Amaru* y otras piezas de teatro, fue profesor visitante en la Universidad de Minnesota desde marzo hasta junio, 1975.