

**Texts and Contexts
of
Idea Vilariño's Poetry**

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Introduction

Idea Vilariño (1920) was born in Montevideo and, with the exception of brief professional trips and vacations, has always lived in Uruguay. Her longest visit abroad came in 1954 when she accompanied her sister to Sweden for medical treatment then stayed several months in France and Spain where she met many artists, among them, Pablo Neruda. In 1967 she travelled to Havana, Cuba and participated along with other distinguished poets in an homage to Rubén Darío. She returned to that city the following year as a member of the jury panel in poetry for Casa de las Américas competitions. Vilariño participated in the Universidad Católica's celebration of the centenary of Darío's *Azul* in Santiago, Chile in 1988. In recent years she has spoken at the Louvre in Paris, the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and at conferences in Mexico, Peru, and Sweden. But mostly, she has spent her time writing poetry, songs, and literary criticism, and translating Shakespearean plays which have been staged in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. For many years she owned a small house on the beach in Las Toscas, Uruguay. That little hideaway, far from the bustle of the capital, had no electricity and relatively few other modern comforts but brought this writer inspiration and the solitude required for her work.

Once she began to publish her poetry in the early 1940s, Uruguayan critics immediately noted—and have continued to comment—its exceptional and unique quality. If her fame did not go beyond national borders for many years, it is surely the result of her relative lack of travels and her particular personality and beliefs which have caused the poet to reject possibilities for self-aggrandizement. Even when editors have urged that this author promote her books, she has refused to do so. Instead, she has maintained almost complete silence regarding her work,

even to the point of regularly refusing interviews of any kind.

Nevertheless, Idea Vilariño's reading public has grown remarkably both at home and abroad. Several of her books have reached multiple editions, and one, *Poemas de amor*, achieved its twelfth printing in 1991. Even without travel or promotion, the poet's work has gone beyond national confines. Translations appeared in Italy and the United States.¹ The prestigious editorial house, Lumen, in Spain, compiled a double volume including her *Poemas de amor* and *Nocturnos* in 1984. Casa de las Américas in Cuba published portions of the same books under the title *Nocturnos del pobre amor* in 1989. A bilingual anthology was released in Italy in 1989.² A critical study of her work published in Mexico in 1990 had won its author the Premio de Ensayo Literario José Revueltas two years earlier.³ Shortly thereafter, a selection of Vilariño's poetry was sponsored by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.⁴ The writer's work has become an indispensable part of every comprehensive anthology of contemporary Hispanic American poetry. Recently, her verses began to appear in textbooks for students of Spanish in the United States. Without a doubt, Idea Vilariño's lyrical work is beginning to achieve the international recognition it deserves.

Her career in writing seems to be the inevitable outcome of innate talent, a good education, and an exceptional family life. Her father, Leandro Vilariño, was a poet and anarchist who encouraged his children's intellectual growth. He especially enjoyed reciting Juan Ramón Jiménez and Juan Parra del Riego at the dinner table. The family enjoyed regular visits to the theatre for everything from opera to plays by Florencio Sánchez. Clearly, Idea idolized her father even though her own poetry bears no visible influence of his style. She collected and posthumously published some of his work under the title *Poesía 1915-1925* (1953). Her mother, Josefina Romani, took responsibility for the children's musical education by supervising their teachers and lessons. Idea first studied piano and later, violin. She also attempted to acquire her mother's culinary skills, but says she met with little success. A voracious appetite for books consumed her time.

Idea Vilariño is the second of five children born to that marriage. Alma, Idea, Poema, Azul, and Numen are the names Leandro Vilariño gave his three daughters and two sons. Even before she had learned to write, Idea was already composing

what she now calls "poemitas absurdos en correctos octosílabos." She published her first poem at age eleven, after having won a school prize. The theme, she recalls, as having to do with a "vendedor de globos."⁵ By adolescence, she had read the classics of Spanish, French, English, and Russian literature. About the time the Vilariño daughters reached young womanhood, they began to work as volunteers with a group which hoped to establish a "Teatro Independiente" in Montevideo. Those plans went up in smoke when a sudden blaze destroyed the building they had rented.

Long before her youngest brother, Numen, was an adult, the family knew he was a gifted pianist. Today, the surviving Vilariño offspring—Idea, Poema, and Numen—continue to share their unique talents with the people of Uruguay. Poema has long been a political activist and Numen, now back from Paris after a lengthy exile, gives concerts around the country and music classes in his studio in downtown Montevideo. Although the Vilariño children eventually married, only Numen and his wife, the dancer Ema Haberli, ever had children. Idea's marriage occurred somewhat late in life for such plans. She and the educator/writer Jorge Liberati were married during the difficult years of the dictatorship and, though now divorced, continue to share an extraordinary friendship. Vilariño, who at one point considered a career in science, over the years has applied her talents to teaching, translation, and literary criticism and perhaps most importantly, to the composition of verse. While the subject of this book is the latter, her accomplishments in the former cannot be ignored.

Vilariño began her professional academic career in 1952 at the Liceo de Nueva Helvecia where she taught literature. She later transferred to the Instituto Alfredo Vásquez Acevedo where she remained until 1974. She gave her first university course, "Problemas de métrica y de ritmo en la poesía de Rubén Darío," in 1970 for the Departamento de Literatura Iberoamericana de la Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias at the Universidad de la República. From 1985-1987, she taught Uruguayan literature at the same university. All the while, she was busy writing poetry and, in the early days, collaborating on journals.

From 1947-1948, she worked with Manuel Claps, Angel Rama, Emir Rodríguez Monegal, and Ida Vitale to publish *Clinamen*. From 1949-1955, she, Claps, and Rodríguez Monegal directed one of the most respected Uruguayan journals ever pub-

lished, *Número*. In 1950, Mario Benedetti joined the editorial staff and was the only one of the original board who continued during the journal's second series which ran from 1962-1964. It was in the pages of those journals that Vilariño first began to publish translations and critical essays. She has maintained an active interest in both, as witnessed by publications listed here in the bibliography and by theatrical presentations in Buenos Aires and Montevideo of her translations of Shakespeare. One of her critical studies, *Conocimiento de Darío* (1988), won both the Premio Nacional de la Crítica Bartolomé Hidalgo in 1988 and the Premio Ensayo from the Ministerio de Educación y Cultura in 1990.

This writer has practiced poetry and criticism simultaneously for more than five decades. Self-criticism has led her to revise significantly both individual lyrical texts and the content of collections as they have reached multiple editions. Likewise, it has caused her to discard certain poems, and even to suppress entire collections. Her labors have produced the following editions (and often versions) of these books of verse: *La suplicante* (1945); *Cielo cielo* (1947); *Paraíso perdido 1945-1948* (1949); *Por aire sucio* (1950, 1951); *Nocturnos* (1955, 1963, 1975, 1986); *Poemas de amor* (1957, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1972, 1976, 1979, 1979, 1984, 1988, 1991); *Poemas de amor y Nocturnas* (1984); *Nocturnos del pobre amor* (1989); *Pobre mundo* (1966, 1988); *Treinta poemas* (1967); *Poesía* (1970); *Segunda antología* (1980); and *No* (1980, 1989). Alongside a critical rework of her own poetry, she has published numerous articles and books of literary criticism.

The development of such a dual career leads one to wonder what insights this author might afford those concerned with interpretation of her poetry. Benedetti points out the difficulty that the poet-artist and the critic face as each views a given work, saying that "simplemente, hay entre ambos una barrera. El artista está del lado de adentro de la obra o del espectáculo, el crítico está del lado de afuera. Son posiciones congénitas, y ambas tienen sus ventajas y desventajas."⁶ Considering his comments, what can be expected, then, of the poet who is also a critic and comments on his/her own texts? According to T.S. Eliot, if an author is young he is likely to produce a critical defense of his work.⁷ Baudelaire, no doubt in a defensive mood, declares that "for a critic to become a poet would be miraculous, whereas for a poet not to have a critic within him is impossible."⁸ This tenuous relationship between internal and external informants as

understood by those cited, becomes less a dichotomy in Paul De Man's interpretation of poetic language. He believes that the relationship between author and critic "does not designate a difference in the type of activity involved, since no fundamental discontinuity exists between two acts that both aim at full understanding; the difference is primarily temporal in kind."⁹

While Vilariño has concerned herself with both the composition and criticism of poetry, and has displayed a critical attitude towards her verses as evidenced by revisions, her own pronouncements regarding that lyrical work have been few. As stated earlier, the author has refused to promote her poetry and has routinely denied interviews. For more than thirty years she also rejected numerous nominations for literary prizes. She was, in fact, one of fifty intellectuals who signed a "Manifiesto Renuncia" in 1955, stating that the system for nominations would first have to be changed to become more equitable. A newspaper article entitled "Idea Vilariño: una actitud digna" informed the public nearly nine years later that:

El premio "Poesía" por el año 1963 le correspondió a Idea Vilariño por su poemario *Poemas de amor*. Tomando una actitud honesta y tajante de no confundirse con quienes han olvidado el compromiso contraído a la firma del Manifiesto, la gran poetisa nuestra acaba de renunciar a su premio, manteniendo de esa manera in-cambiados todos los términos de la protesta . . .¹⁰

It was not until 1987, after systematic changes and because of the urging of friends to accept, that the poet agreed to receive the highest honor that Uruguay can bestow on a writer, the Gran Premio Literario José Enrique Rodó de la Intendencia Municipal de Montevideo. By doing so, she became the first woman to receive that prize. This prestigious award is given every two years for a life's work and had previously gone to Carlos Sabat Ercasty, Serafín J. García and Julio C. Da Rosa.

Vilariño's consistent, anti-publicity minded attitude towards her work, makes all the more valuable the scarce commentaries she has made. Because of her esteem for Benedetti, she answered his written queries which were published as a newspaper article in 1971 and later became a chapter in his book, *Los poetas comunicantes*. When asked if she recognizes influences in her poetry, as some journalists have suggested, she replies: