

**THE DEVELOPING POETIC PHILOSOPHY  
OF PEDRO SALINAS**

*A Study in Twentieth Century Spanish Poetry*

*"La reconquista de la entereza del hombre"*

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## Preface

Pedro Salinas' poetic trajectory implies, both in its overall outline and in its detail, an impulse towards wholeness. The generally accepted three successive phases of his verse, taken together, present a broadly symmetrical chronological development: three collections of work essentially from the 1920s, three from the 1930s, and three largely from the 1940s. His first book, by its very title *Presagios*, stands on the brink or verge of what is to come (an anticipatory attitude reflected in the title of his first prose volume *Víspera de gozo*, also poised on the threshold of imminent experience). Given this forward-looking perspective, it is no surprise that both the initial and concluding poems of *Presagios* contain the word *mañana*. A mirror-image of this feeling of prelude is detectable in the valedictory tone of his last verse collection *Confianza*. While Lorna Shaughnessy rightly emphasizes the open-ended quality of Salinas's philosophy of life, nevertheless, the final volume of his poetic corpus conveys an awareness of lyrical consummation, since phrases such as "hay algo que se completa" or "Ya está el poema, / aquí, completo" imply the culminating fruit of past experience.

Within the general context of this comprehensive framing device, moreover, a remarkable degree of unity is noticeable too at each major stage in Salinas's evolution as a poet. Thus Crispin sees in the titles of the early-period works three progressive steps in the formulation of an aesthetic: from *Presagios* (primary

contacts with reality hint at deeper meanings), via *Seguro azar* (chance discovery provides fresh insight) to *Fábula y signo* (the transformation of external reality into myth). As for the middle-period works of the love cycle, it is arguable that not only do they represent the core of Salinas's achievement in verse but that, by virtue of their thematic interconnectedness as a trilogy, *La voz a ti debida*, *Razón de amor*, and *Largo lamento* constitute the most integrated group in his output. Here the tendency towards organic unity is significantly highlighted in the case of *La voz a ti debida* by the subtitle *poema* which indicates the latent capacity for the volume's seventy sections to combine into a single massive whole. Even his late works, which at first glance appear the most disparate, can be seen to complement one another in a coherent synthesis: hence the crisis of contemporary social values in *Todo más claro* is flanked by two collections that take comfort in the timeless consolations of nature. One of these, *El Contemplado*, is particularly apt for there the sea (whose fluidity engenders in the observer a flow of associations) becomes an all-embracing symbol that embodies the notion of *entereza* by evoking an infinite variety of analogies. The richness of this experience, in turn, has an equally relevant healing effect on the poet, making him whole, and reminding him, here as elsewhere, that he is part of a whole sum of past and future human experience.

Salinas's incisively witty and ebullient, avant-garde verse treatments of city life and its artefacts from the 1920s have worn far better than his much more discursive handling of metropolitan malaise in the 1940s. Actually a subtle thread of modern urban reality survives even in works like *La voz a ti debida* and *El Contemplado* where it supplies a discreet but effective counterpoint to the texts' transcendental concerns. But, ironically, the fact that of these examples *Todo más claro* alone now seems dated may be attributable to the special circumstances in which it was written. Although Salinas' years of exile in America were undoubtedly his most prolific and multifaceted as he diversified into drama,

narrative fiction, literary criticism and essays, an uncharitable commentator might deduce that, by cultivating such a diverse range of genres in his quest for wholeness, he over-extended himself and dissipated his creative energies, channelling them in too many directions so that the poems lose some of their edge as the distinction between lyricism and prose polemic becomes blurred.

Salinas once wrote that "Al hablar de la poesía de la realidad, tenemos que concebirla como siendo cada vez más integradora y abarcadora". The appropriateness of such a goal in the context of *entereza* is obvious and its relevance to the Spaniard's own practice is not difficult to illustrate. His wide-ranging expansiveness manifested itself in an embrace that reached beyond the confines of his native culture while simultaneously accommodating the entire Spanish tradition of the past. Aged almost thirty-three when his first volume of poems appeared in 1924, he had been composing verse for more than a decade and had even considered publishing a collection as early as 1913. Right from the start, however, his aesthetic horizons were wide. Here the influence of his friend and francophile Enrique Díez-Canedo was decisive both in stimulating his interest in French poetry and in encouraging him to obtain a teaching-post at the Sorbonne from 1914 to 1917. Solita Salinas has written of her father's cosmopolitanism, "Le parecía importantísimo, para él y para España, el contacto con el mundo europeo". Between the turn of the century and the diaspora of the Civil War, among his older and younger contemporaries, Machado, Jiménez, Guillén and Cernuda also lived for a time in France, and Aleixandre, though unable to do likewise for health reasons, was at least as well read as any of them in French literature. Similarly, Jiménez, Salinas, Guillén and Lorca had all spent significant periods either in England or America by 1930. Such exposure to other cultures may help explain the extraordinary blossoming of Spanish poetry during these years. In Salinas's case attention has been drawn to his translations of Proust and their possible influence on his own evolution. Yet how, we might wonder, would the Spanish