

AT THE WHIRPOOL'S RIM: THE VOICE OF PEDRO GARFIAS IN THE GENERATION OF 1927

Our riches are centrifugal; men compose
Daily, unwittingly, their final dreams
And those are our own voices whose remote
Consummate chorus rides on the whirlpool's rim,
Past which we flog our sails,
towards which we drift,
Plying our trades, in hopes of a good drowning.

"Marginalia," Richard Wilbur

Consideration of the poetic generation of 1927 tends to focus on the brilliantly vital and creative imaginative moments that characterize the works and lives of that group. Examining this era, one moves from the dazzling verses of *Cántico*, to the tragedies of Lorca, to the lyrical splendor of Salinas, Alberti and their contemporaries. It is difficult not to think of these poetic figures, so central to our understanding of this century, as frozen in a series of characteristic modes. In order to counterbalance this tendency, it is valuable to examine the lives of other artists of this generation who, despite marginalization by literary history and through personal idiosyncrasy, formed an integral part of its richness. By placing the lives and works of such individuals alongside those at the center, we can come to understand how age and defeat, individual achievement in shared catastrophe, as well as that brilliant creativity helped to shape the poetic legacy of the Generation of 1927. There is greatness in the whole story, the one that includes lives of accumulating disaster, disappointment and disorder. An open critical stance, freed from inherited literary prejudices, allows us to examine the works of those who, despite their defeat, enriched the poetic canon.

To appreciate the stunning variety of literary textures that this era produced, and to consider this generation fully, we must heed the profound voices at its margins. Pedro Garfias was one of the poets whose life and works illuminate not only his own existence, but also that of the generation that reveled in the tumultuous vanguard esthetic, suffered through the

Spanish Civil War, and confronted the exile of the Spanish intellectuals that followed. A study of this poet's works clearly enriches our experience as readers. If we examine the complex relationship between Garfias' life, his art, and his times, we necessarily expand our understanding of the period. Garfias' poetry shows us how one particular sensibility responded to the events that provoked imaginative responses from an entire generation of Spaniards.

At the age of sixteen, Pedro Garfias left the landscapes of his youth—the church towers, olive groves, quiet plazas and the shadows of Osuna and Cabra, the Andalusian villages whose images link his first poetry with the final verses written in exile. Garfias arrived in the Spanish capital in 1917, a time when Madrid was a center of fervent literary activity. Two cafés—the Café Colonial, where Cansinos-Asséns encouraged new esthetic currents, and the Café Pombo, where Ramón Gómez de la Serna served as a magnet for poetic discussions—were places where lively discussions of new poetry arriving from France, the problems of Modernist rhetoric, and the possibilities of establishing a new poetic absorbed the days and nights of Garfias and others of his generation. Huidobro's visit to Madrid galvanized the literary groups into action, and the result was the Ultraist manifesto of 1919. At that moment, Garfias found himself in the center of the action.

Cuando yo caigo en Madrid, estábamos hartos de esa cosa rubeniana. No de Rubén Darío, que como él no ha habido otro, sino de los segundones que lo imitaban. Entonces publicamos, en todos los periódicos, nuestro manifiesto ultraísta contra las princesas, es decir, contra la pompa decorativa del modernismo.¹

Garfias' personal involvement in the *ultraísta* movement was intense. In two brief years his life was transformed from that of a solitary maverick in a provincial setting to that of a member of a fraternity of cosmopolitan writers whose interests and intellectual contacts spanned two continents. Garfias was one of the most fervent participants in the movement to strip modernist rhetoric of its conventions and establish a new esthetic that would reduce poetry to its essential element: the metaphor.

Garfias habla en cubista...

Sentimos la embriaguez iconoclasta y en torno nuestro... runrunea un nombre: Montoto...

¡Ultra!

Es la consigna. A este grito, hay un verdadero fracaso de cristales. Pedro Garfias, circunspecto y tácito, alza el brazo y arroja sus proyectiles con la violencia bíblica de un profeta... Yo cumplo con mi deber, aun me excedo, estoy seguro de haber roto el busto de Rodríguez Marín —el enemigo de Cervantes— que alboreaba en las sombras de la biblioteca montotina...²

¹ Alejandro Aviles, "Pedro Garfias, el poeta que vive de sus versos," *El Universal*, Mexico 31 May 1953, p. 19.

² Juan Gómez Olmedilla, "La Epopeya del Ultra," *Grecia*, 30 June 1919, pp. 14-15.

Fraternal warmth and admiration marks all descriptions of Garfias during these years. With Garfias thoroughly accepted and highly esteemed by his companions, 1919-1922 seem to have been years of optimism for the poet. His work from that period reveals the influence of Ultra; it is filled with futurist images, exultation at the exorcism of romanticism, paeans to his contemporaries, and daring metaphors:

Las ramas se han colgado sus pendientes
y el Sol
el Sol
el Sol
Ha tendido sus redes.
Mi corazón es un pez rojo entre las mallas.³

In 1922, Garfias founded the magazine, *Horizonte*, in which verses by *ultraístas* poets were published along with those of the new poets who would form part of the Generation of 1927: Jorge Guillén, Rafael Alberti, and Federico García Lorca. It also included poetry of the former generation: Antonio Machado and Juan Ramón Jiménez. "Editamos la revista *Ultra*... Y cuando ya habíamos escrito demasiados disparates, clausuramos *Ultra* y fundamos *Horizonte*... Empecé a quitar locos y a sumar valores. Valores de la generación anterior como Juan Ramón y los Machado. De la generación nuestra, nosotros publicamos el primer poema de Alberti y el primero de Lorca en Madrid."⁴ The poetry of previous generations had been scorned by Ultraísmo, a movement whose contempt for the past was embodied in Garfias' 1919 entreaty for total obliteration of all existing art: "Hagamos más fuerte nuestro abrazo contra lo antiguo; formemos el cuadro, que oponga a todas partes lanzas agudas y nosotros airados... Neguémosle nuestro respeto a los viejos: *si acaso*, repetimos su obra—he dicho ha llegado el momento de la severa revisión; pero enterremos sus nombres en un definitivo silencio de tumba."⁵ Yet by 1922 Garfias' vision had changed radically. The publication of *Horizonte* marks the consolidation of a new generation in Spanish letters that, in the words of Jorge Guillén, "felt no need of repudiating its ancestors, remote or immediate, in order to establish itself."⁶

The publication of this journal marked Garfias' iconoclastic position within the group. Despite success at capturing in his verses double or triple permutations of sensations upon one theme and despite the daring quality of metaphors and images, the lyrical-humorous tone and fresh sense of language his ultraist verses reveals, Garfias broke with the group in 1923.

The decision to leave Madrid, to abandon his literary coterie, was made

³ Pedro Garfias, "Sol," *Grecia*, 20 August 1919, p. 8.

⁴ Alejandro Aviles, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁵ Pedro Garfias, "La Fiesta de Ultra," *Grecia*, 20 June 1919, pp. 9-10.

⁶ Jorge Guillén, *Language and Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 203.

in part because he longed to escape the company of the more opportunistic members of the *ultraísta* crowd, and in part because he sensed his need for surroundings that would give him the opportunity to establish a personal voice—a time to exercise the full range of his imagination and experience. Freed from the nineteenth century constraints that marred his early work, possessing a language and gift for metaphor that would allow him to write some of the most moving poetry of exile in this century, Garfias returned to Osuna ready to distance himself from the avant-garde and to seek his own style. The book that emerges from his retreat, *El Ala del Sur*, combines the energy of the vanguardist metaphors with profound sentiments intimately linked with nature. In this book, Garfias excludes the sterile, purely experimental poems of the *ultraístas* years, and includes those in which new metaphors are used to recreate authentic experience. Some of the verses are capricious, some dazzling, but all reveal a coherent, identifiable personal style. In 1927, Garfias contributed “Romance de la Soledad” to the tercentenary homage to Góngora. Here, his unique voice—rejecting the irreality of the modernist world and at the same time overcoming the incoherence so often evidenced in Ultraist verses—can be heard in its maturity:

Aquí estoy sobre mis montes
pastor de mis soledades.

Los ojos fieros clavados
como arpones en el aire.

Tiene el tiempo en mis oídos
retumbos de tempestades.

Mi corazón se acelera
sobre el volar de las aves.⁷

If the years between 1923-1930 produced a distance between Garfias and his contemporaries, this period was also one in which he separated politically and emotionally from his family. Garfias' estrangement was gradual but inevitable. The Garfias family were landowners and staunch monarchists, but the young Pedro began organizing workers in his father's olive groves to demand better working conditions. Shortly after the formation of the Second Republic, Garfias joined the Communist Party. In July, 1936, he entered one of the first popular militias to be formed in Seville, while his family remained committed to the monarchist cause.

It is not possible to separate history and Garfias' poetic voice. The pain and misery that surrounded him during the war startled Garfias from his silence, and, once again, he began to write prodigiously. The poetry he produced during the conflict is a record of its horrors: war is seen not as glory, but as anguish; the poet is not merely an observer, but an active

⁷ Pedro Garfias, “Romance de la Soledad,” *De Soledad y Otros Pesares* (Monterrey: Universidad de Nuevo León, México, 1948), p. 63.

participant on the front. During the war Garfias' voice was often transmitted on Radio Valencia. Its resonant quality captivated those who listened, and these broadcasts ring in the memories of his contemporaries. Garfias published a great number of political poems in magazines printed during the war, and with these poems he achieved the fame and acceptance formerly denied him. In 1938, Tomás Navarro Tomás, Antonio Machado and Enrique Diez-Canedo, awarded him the Premio Nacional de Literatura for his book *Héroes del Sur* (1938). Yet, the military effort cost Garfias dearly. His first hand experience with war, the death and mutilation of friends, the suffering at seeing people twisted by events beyond their control, left painful scars, and he seemed to retreat again into solitude:

replegado en sí mismo... vivía en una profunda soledad, como encerrado en un misterioso laboratorio poético, del que sólo él tuviese llave y secreto. Le encontraba a veces por la calle y me parecía un sonámbulo, extraño aparentemente al mundo que le rodeaba, aunque sufría, vivía y creaba para ese mundo... Por calles y plazas de la ciudad pegado a sus muros como un edicto, podía leerse su último poema en que apelaba a la defensa de la patria en peligro...

...Pedro Garfias me cantaba en un penoso esfuerzo hecho de dolor y de coñac, en un sopor pesado en el que parecía iba a hundirse para siempre.⁸

In addition to the wartime poems on partisan themes, Garfias wrote verses that express a deep melancholy that surfaces again and again in the final decade of his life in exile. Garfias' public role as a poet during the war weighed heavily on him and forced him to silence his private voice:

A mitad de la guerra
me detengo
mar de Valencia a tu orilla,
mientras pienso
con mi parte que no puede
que no quiere ser guerrero:
¿Qué fue de mi vida antigua,
de mis sueños,
de mis ilusiones nobles,
de mi corazón abierto...

Una cólera me corre
por las venas como fuego,
una angustia me sofoca
como piedra sobre el pecho
y pone en mis ojos tristes
su desvelo
una visión implacable
de muertos, muertos y muertos...⁹

The impending victory of the insurgents made it necessary for Garfias to

⁸ Carlos Palacio, "Recuerdos de una lejana amistad," *España Libre*, Dec. 1967, p. 1.

⁹ Pedro Garfias, "En Valencia, Enfermo," *Poesía de la Guerra Española* (Mexico: Minerva, 1941), p. 55.

flee Spain. He arrived in England in February, 1936. There, Garfias produces *Primavera en Eaton Hastings* (1939). This volume stands as one of the most poignant expressions of the tragedy of the Spanish exile. Composed in April and May of 1936, these poems achieve incredible power; each line strikes the reader with the clear vision of a moment lived: love, anger over the useless death of friends, the overwhelming colors of the English countryside, the memories of the plants and landscapes of Andalucía, and the sharp pain of having left Spain behind forever. The greening of the English spring causes Garfias tremendous nostalgia:

Porque te siento lejos y tu ausencia
Habita mis desiertas soledades
qué profunda esta tarde derramada
sobre los verdes campos inmortales.¹⁰

An acute sense of loss permeates his world:

Si me quedase inmóvil, como esta buena encina
vendrían vuestros pájaros a anidar a mi frente,
vendrían vuestras aguas a morder mis raíces
y aún seguiría viendo con su blancura intacta
quién sabe si dormida, la España que he perdido.¹¹

For Garfias, poetry is the only salvation from chaos:

Aunque te rompas, frágil bóveda, en mil pedazos
esta noche estrellada
yo tengo que gritar en este bosque inglés
de robles pensativos y altos pinos sonoros.¹²

He seeks help that will allow him to resist the pain of exile:

Señor que hiciste el verso y la amapola
haz las paredes de mi pecho fuertes,
duras como el cristal de esta ventana.¹³

And at times finds solace in his imagination:

Yo te puedo poblar, soledad mía
igual que puedo hacer rosas y árboles
de estas oscuras gentes que me cercan.
¿Cómo, si no, llevar sobre los hombros
la ausencia?¹⁴

¹⁰ Pedro Garfias, *Primavera en Eaton Hastings* (Mexico: Tezontle, 1939.) All quotes are from the third edition (Mexico: Era, 1962), p. 9.

¹¹ Pedro Garfias, *Primavera en Eaton Hastings*, p. 18.

¹² Pedro Garfias, *Primavera en Eaton Hastings*, p. 33.

¹³ Pedro Garfias, *Primavera en Eaton Hastings*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Pedro Garfias, *Primavera en Eaton Hastings*, p. 16.

If *Primavera en Eaton Hastings* had been the only work Garfias had published, it would make him worthy of recognition beside the best poets of his age. Its direct and profound expression of the anguish of exile allows the reader to grasp fully the devastating impact of the defeat of the Republic.

Garfias left England on the ship "Sinaia," along with 1800 other Spaniards. After his arrival in México, Garfias accepted a post at the University of Nuevo León. It was there that he wrote his last political poem: "Elegía a la Presa de Dnieprostroi" (1943) in which he affirms support for the Soviets in their resistance to the Nazi invasion. From that time forth, Garfias's voice turns increasingly inward. The lyrical power of *Primavera en Eaton Hastings* derives from the expression of the poet's solitary confrontation with his definitive separation from his country. His genius is revealed in the inimitable power of explaining to us what he intimately knew, that exile was, for him, equivalent to his personal destruction, that exile is, as José Luis Cano has said, "vida con muerte. El destierro se traga, incansables años, vidas, cuerpos de poetas."¹⁵ This painful reality surges as the predominant note in his book, *De Soledad y Otros Pesares* (1948) that, in addition to gathering almost all Garfias' publications, contains his new poems written in México. These later verses are finely wrought, but lack the sense of exuberance expressed in his earlier works. Although images that exalt life still appear, those that project an aura of despair predominate. Shadows now become the central images, and the poet realizes that he will never escape his depression:

Ahora que el cielo sorbe la llanura
y el sol detiene absorto su carrera
veo mi vida como loca esfera
girar de día claro en noche oscura.

Y en cuanto la memoria se me niega
sigo mirando lo que hará el olvido
vencida la luz a la insaciable sombra.¹⁶

This plaintive tone prevails in all of Garfias' subsequent works. The voice belongs to one whose loneliness had been made bearable by his sense of belonging to his own land. In the Twenties, when the pettiness of literary life had become overwhelming, he had returned to Andalucía to recover his sense of himself. After the war, when return was no longer a possibility, a grave depression takes over his life, an intolerable sadness that made his ultimate dissolution inevitable.

After 1948, Garfias made a series of trips around México, giving recitals and conferences. Yet the disorder of his existence became terrifying to those who cared for him. His suffering is recorded in his book *Río de aguas*

¹⁵ José Luis Cano, *Poesía Española del Siglo XX* (Madrid: Ediciones Guadarrama, 1960), p. 185.

¹⁶ Pedro Garfias, *De Soledad y Otros Pesares*, op. cit., p. 144.

amargas (1953). Here, instead of encountering the poet whose good will, intelligence, and resounding voice captivated all who knew him, the reader hears a solitary, melancholy soul.

There are tender verses in this book, which records the poet's struggle to have reason prevail over chaos. A sense of innocence and intense loneliness—surprisingly not unlike that of Emily Dickinson—dominates:

Yo he conocido a un árbol
que me quería bien.
Jamás supe su nombre,
no se lo pregunté
y él nunca me lo dijo:
cuestión de timidez...

Le dije muchas cosas
que a nadie más diré
mas que a la vieja estrella
que alguna vez hablé.¹⁷

Several of these songs of desperation are dedicated to the many friends who tried to help Garfias. Despite their efforts, Garfias never recovered spiritually from the separation from Spain. While the majority of exiled Spanish poets quickly established themselves in Mexican literary life—founding new magazines, frequenting tertulias, lecturing, teaching—Garfias remained essentially apart. From his departure from Madrid in 1923, he had refused to belong to literary groups. Generous, open, affectionate with others, a gifted reader of poetry, he had no inclination to form part of the group of exiled writers. Garfias was unable to recreate for himself a life that would, to the extent possible, provide consolation for this radical loneliness.

Despite the marginal status that Garfias occupies in literary histories, the vitality of his poetic language and metaphor, combined with the profound emotion and sincerity of his verses, marks his work as that of a truly gifted sensibility.

Garfias' inability to deal with the war and exile marginalized him. Yet a careful reading of his works allows us to understand the failure of this poet's dreams and poignantly illuminates circumstances that other writers were able to cope with—circumstances that led ultimately to Garfias' demise. In his often lonely attempts to connect to something larger than himself—attempts that usually failed—Garfias' life underscores an aspect of his generation's struggle often masked in the work of his contemporaries.

Expanding the canon to include writers defined as marginal enlightens and moves us; it prevents us from developing a distorted and static mythology of literary generations, and allows us to reorganize perceptions about

¹⁷ Pedro Garfias, *Río de Aguas Amargas* (Guadarrama, 1953), p. 19.

literature in a way that transforms us as readers. Stephen Gilman is a teacher and scholar who, in encouraging us to move beyond the traditional literary canon, has broadened our realm of understanding and enjoyment by providing us with a critical stance free from the limitation of conventional critical prejudices.

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Anyone who attempts to understand the dramatic labels 'tragedy,' 'comedy,' and 'tragicomedy' must face the fact that the history of their use is full of confusion. Both playwrights and theoreticians, ancient and modern, are responsible for this state of affairs. The trend toward a series of rigid precepts in the Renaissance—a trend in which tragedy and comedy were strictly defined on the basis of types of characters, incidents, ending, etc.—has to ignore the fact that many tragedies have traits usually found in comedies and vice-versa. Further complication is due to the spread of the term 'tragicomedia.'¹ As Marvin Herrick points out in his study of tragicomedy,² neither the ancients nor their Renaissance translators and/or commentators understood what Mercury was talking about in Plautus' *Ampylitryon* when he uttered the word 'tragicomoedia.' The confusion looms even larger when we realize that the sixteenth and seventeenth century Spaniard, when he used the term 'comedia,' ignored the strict distinctions of the theoreticians and resorted for the most part the unpopular and misunderstood term 'tragicomedia.' The task remains, therefore, to explain further what might have contributed to the preferred use in Spain of the term 'comedia' (rather than 'tragicomedia') to refer to the mixed plays.

In my above-mentioned article I emphasized that the Spanish preference for the mixed dramatic piece, known as *comedia*, seems to have been influenced by a group of Italian playwrights. At that time I did not try to explain the background for this but it appears logical to conclude that, given the great importance of the concepts of verisimilitude and mimesis, and given the fact that life contained both comic and tragic elements, a play, in order to be verisimilar, had to contain both elements also. And since the ancients defined comedy as a "speculum vitae" (Livius Andronicus) and as an "imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis" (Cicero)³ it is

¹ For a detailed discussion of many of these problems see my "The Term 'Comedia' in Spanish Dramaturgy," *Romanische Forschungen*, 84 (1972), 257-96.

² In *Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, Vol. 57 (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1964), pp. 1-15.

³ References to these authors and these definitions are numerous in the commentaries on Aristotle