

SITUATING PEDRO SALINAS' *EL CONTEMPLADO* IN THE COMPLETE POETRY: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF ROMANTIC DIALECTIC AND THE LACANIAN IMAGINARY¹

It is safe to say that most critics see constants in Salinas' poetic work, a common one being his preoccupation with reality, whether that is understood as the rejection of permanence or its pursuit or a vacillation between the two. Similarly, and equally debated, is whether the poetry's perceived desire for an idealized timelessness (as opposed to the Machadian "word in time," more concerned with the human condition) does or does not place Salinas in the Romantic tradition. One way of resolving this dilemma is to see Romanticism itself—in its English expression, with which Salinas was very familiar and which he greatly admired—as a posture which privileged dialectic, and to read Romantic, and post-Romantic poetry—and thus Salinas' poetry²—as the site of a dialectical struggle between the two ways of being a poet: the way of the seer, Baudelarian interpreter of the world's hieroglyphics, whose language recreates an intuited epiphany not vouchsafed to the ordinary person; and the way of the witness, who testifies to the temporal flux of the human condition. Salinas' poetry, from the beginning, is indeed the locus of such a dialectic: *Presagios* poems about mirrors, with their evocation of rupture and of deception, are in this light understandable in the company of so many others of that collection exulting in the poem's ability to capture and even exalt reality.

But this Romantic dialectic is not only the consequence of rejecting systems and resolutions, although it is that philosophically. Psychologically, the Romantic dialectic reflects the new belief in the unconscious—one may think of Blake's interpretation of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, its most attractive character despite and not because of Milton's conscious ideas—and in the historical biography of the human person, whose evolution, like that of society as a whole, is for the Romantic connected and causally-related. All of these elements: dialectic valued for its own sake; dialectic in the vying conceptions of being a poet (and yet the unassailable conviction of the poet's absolute importance); the existence, although inaccessible, of an unconscious self; the historicity of biography, are related, and they are related to my reading of Salinas' poetry. In it—not specifically in *El contemplado*, but contributing to that book's

¹ All references to Salinas' poetry come from Pedro Salinas, *Poesías completas*, ed. Solita Salinas de Marichal, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1971, 1981.

² On Salinas and English Romanticism, see my essay "Salinas y el romanticismo inglés" in *Ínsula* (540), December 1991, 11-12.

dynamics—I see something similar to a Bloomian “anxiety of influence,” although (reading through Lacan rather than Freud) I see the past not as “burden” (W. J. Bates’ earlier term) but as the means by which the fledgling poet (and then the maturing one) defines himself. The past serves as a measure which provokes an unconscious evolution consisting in turn of imitation, rebellion, acceptance and finally transcendence of the poet’s tradition as he unconsciously interprets it. This trajectory follows that of the Lacanian developing self: except that it has to do exclusively with the definition (or perhaps better, self-definition) of what I call the poetic self, as opposed to the biographical (or autobiographical) one. The *idea* of the poet underlies and accompanies poems that on the surface deal with other themes. This is clearest in the love trilogy, and most specifically worked out in *La Voz a ti debida*, whose drama of love won and love lost—a complete story—coincides with the story of the poet’s self-definition; but the same trajectory is repeated in *El contemplado*, to a similar end even if for different reasons.

The love poems of *Voz* and the other two books of the trilogy are governed by the poet’s preoccupation with the beloved and with the fact of love. Since the love affair ends during the course of the *Voz* poems, and *Razón de amor* and *Largo lamento* are both concerned with the absence of the beloved and the loss of love, the protagonist must find a way of compensating for what he mourns. This he comes to do, beginning in the first book and in reiterated allusions in the other two, by redefining the significance of the love affair, and accepting the loss of love as a manifestation of what he perceives to be a universal compensation: what he comes to see as counting is not the individual, idiosyncratic loss, the irrevocable absence of the beloved person, but the situation of the lovers in a never-ending chain, as one more example to the world of what it is to have, and then not have, love. This gesture is significant in Lacanian terms, because it moves the protagonist beyond the imaginary stage in which the beloved seems to be the image of the self in which that self seeks completion, and which the self believes it completes. But it also moves the protagonist beyond the symbolic stage, which is governed by difference, learned first from language, and which at least at some level admits the idea of death. The idea of a substituting chain is also Lacanian (and Saussaurian); and the relevance to language, particularly poetic language, is in more than one sense crucial.³ The love trilogy’s chain originates in literature, specifically the Shelleyan idea (expressed in his *Defence*, where it is surely a compensatory gesture against the past’s burden) that every poem is an episode in the one

³ The idea of the chain occurs from the beginning of Salinas’ published poetry, in the well-known epigraph to *Presagios*—“Forjé un eslabón un día,/ otro día forjé otro/ y otro./ De pronto se me juntaron/—era la cadena—todos.” But its use there is an almost naively optimistic faith in the unity and integrity of the poetic mission, and perhaps of the human self, rather than as sublimation or compensation for loss.

great poem.⁴ Since *El contemplado* is not a love story but a kind of rhapsody, one would not expect to find in it a need for compensation. But in fact the need exists simply because the poet, at a level presumably unconscious, becomes aware in the course of the sequence that the attachment to the sea is a mirror-stage one (and how accurate the image is). In a sense, the book can be read as the vatic revelation of the poet as seer. But as the poetry of a post-Romantic, this posture is “always already” challenged by the self-creating voice in time which sees the falseness of the imaginary stasis and speaks in testimony of the inevitable movement, change and decay of all things and all attachments. Beyond even this—beyond, that is, the dialectic implicit in the two ways of being a poet—is the lesson learned from Shelley and lived through, at least poetically, in the trilogy: that the individual attachment itself is in the service of a higher commitment. This is why *El contemplado* moves from the idea, in its first poem, that the sea is created anew by the poet: “...desde el día/en que mis ojos te estrenaron” [vv. 20-21] to the conviction, in its last poem, that the poet’s eyes are part of an infinite series of eyes that contemplate the “one great poem of the sea”:

..¡Qué sinfín/
de muertos que te vieron
me piden la mirada, para verte!
Al cedérsela gano:
soy mucho más cuando me quiero menos.

[...]

¡Qué paz así! Saber que son los hombres [...] con ojos siempre abiertos,
velándote: si un alma se les marcha
nuevas almas acuden a sus cercos.

“Variación XIV,” vv13-17; 35-39

Although *El contemplado: tema con variaciones* can with justice be considered part of Pedro Salinas’ last poetic phase, along with *Todo más claro* and *Confianza*,⁵ there are equally compelling reasons for reading this collection as a postlude to *Voz, Razón* and *Lamento*. *El Contemplado* was inspired by Salinas’ contemplation of the sea, specifically the ocean at Puerto Rico, where he

⁴ Shelley says in the *Defence* that those who are finely “organized,” or attuned, may recognize all poems “as episodes to that great poem, which all poets, like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.” See Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Defence of Poetry,” in, for example, *Criticism: The Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan, New York, St. Martins’, 1975; p.367.

⁵ The last book of the love trilogy of the 1930’s was completed and ready for publication in 1938 (although it was not published then), and when in the early forties the poet began *El contemplado* he had already begun writing the poems that would comprise his two last books.

lived from 1943 to 1945. As both its title and subtitle suggest, it is a book of vision, a record of the poet's bonding with the great sea in a series of ecstatic moments. It makes sense psychologically that, after the failure of a human attachment, the human being seeks solace by connecting himself to something less likely to fail him. Written not long after the final poems in *Lamento*, *El Contemplado* indeed serves that purpose. Like the first part of *Voz*, which parallels the evolution of the Lacanian self as the lover experiences the identification with the beloved, before living through the successive stages, recreated in poetry, of the love affair, *El contemplado* documents the re-enactment of a mirror-stage passion. But even within the stasis of this epiphany, the full movement from initial paradise through suspicion of lack to resolution—that is, from imaginary to symbolic to “real”—also occurs. It is true that the ecstasy and certainty of vision is the compelling force for most of the book, and that only briefly does uncertainty surface and the poet recognize mirror as mirage. Yet *El Contemplado*'s climactic end, in which the poet definitively rejects narcissistic creation, is predicated upon and comprehensible as a result of that brief moment of symbolic awareness.

The first poem of the book, the “tema,” posits the speaker both as poet and as child in relation to the mother. As poet, he begins with priestly or prophetic mastery by naming the ocean (“el contemplado”); this is the opening poem's function. Yet the “tú y yo” relationship which he establishes here, and maintains throughout the book, begins with the discovery of the inevitability of the attraction the sea holds for him; the verses describing this could apply equally to the infant's first visual contact with the mother:

¡Si tú has sido para mí desde el día
que mis ojos te estrenaron
el contemplado, el constante
Contemplado! (19-23)

The child-mother relationship is suggested also in the first variation, “Azules,” in which the sea's blueness is described as an angel who took him by the hand (vv. 12-13). The second variation, “Primavera diaria,” posits a new way of measuring time, in which each dawn is another spring, and thus a kind of transcendence of the ordinary temporal order, as one would expect in the mirror stage. This assertion of poetic power then allows the poet, in Variación III, “Dulcenombre,” to re-establish poetic mastery. The sea may retreat within itself, like a stranger, but naming it familiarizes it to him and elevates him to a dominant or at least equal role; the next variation, indeed, expresses only the joy of reciprocated love. Yet the poet, apparently uneasy in this reversal, hastens to admit the sea's innate superiority. Variación V describes its vast age, source of all the wisdom and the music of the centuries, and acknowledges that it can teach him how to see: with an unending look, or more accurately, a look or looking which has faith that it will never end. Implicitly,

for the first time in *El Contemplado*, the idea of the chain is also suggested, for, he says, although his faith is that the eyes which close at night will reopen in the morning, it may in fact be other eyes that continue the contemplation.

But the poet is still too tied to the imaginary to fully claim this idea. In Variación VII, "Las insulas extrañas," the poetic voice describes islands which the eyes think have died, but whose death is a pretense ("muerte fingida"), since the heaven in which they disappear is not the sky but the sea: "su cielo el mar," v. 58. And the following variation, "Renacimiento de Venus," describes a mirror joy which seems to the speaker productive: a present time, untied to hope or memory, in which pure being is recreated; a midday moment like a mirror ("está el mundo tan limpio que es espejo," in which the soul recognizes itself and the true Venus rises from the sea. To the speaker the world is "mirror clean" at noon because there are no shadows. A real mirror, of course, shows the viewer a reflection, an insubstantial shadow of himself, but the poet here will not accept this, and instead summons vital creation out of eternal stasis and reciprocal identity, by willing beauty from the sea.

This fiction seems to sustain him for three poems more. In "Tiempo de isla," the sea's love invents caresses out of the breeze until the speaker realizes that this happiness is never the lover, but always the totally loved—and is, in fact, life itself ("no es nunca amante, es la amada/ total. Es la vida"). "Circo de la alegría" reiterates the consummate pleasure of watching the ocean weave and unweave itself in endless permanence. And Variación 11, "El poeta," reintroduces the image of the sea as mirror of the sky, from which it is therefore inseparable, to predict that the universe will someday realize that the sea moves only not to move, to be a noon without an afternoon, renouncing time in the full consummation of passion in serenity: and this will be its great achievement.

The joy is not entirely unalloyed: the realization that the love he feels, watching sea and sky, is granted not by a lover but by a beloved, parallels the child's realization of his true relationship to the mother. Presentiment of rupture, then, is imminent; and indeed in Variación XII, "Civitas Dei," the poetic voice contrasts the imagined, incomparable city of the sea with the real city of the modern world-city of technology, offices, numbers, advertisements, a city which makes a mockery of communication (whether biblical revelation or love) and from which only one man, the compassionate—but mute—mockery of modern civilization, Charlie Chaplin, escapes unscathed. In this poem the sea retains its magic evocative power; but its mirror image is no longer an identity, sea with sky, but rather a dark and distorted shadow of itself. And this menacing disjunction is followed, in "Presagios," by the sense of the poet's own mirrored dislocation, in which, in his passionate desire ("querencia," "ansia") to contemplate the sea again, he feels separate, split, from himself: "me siento/ yo mismo y enajenado," final verse.

The trajectory is predictable, if swift. It is with the dawning of linguistic competence, and the understanding of language as social legislator, that the idyllic past is seen as fictive. But although the sense of “enajenado” in Variación XIV is surely that of separation and alienation, the word also means “enraptured”; and the rapture, or seizure which has come upon the poet as he-engaging language now as multivalent “full speech”—understands the fallacy of mirror attachment, allows him to break consciously with narcissism and to propose another solution—if not for himself as poet, then for poetry. “Salvación por la luz,” the final variation, does just this; in it the speaker offers his eyes to those who have died, a generosity whose effect on himself he understands (“soy mucho más cuando me quiero menos”) and whose implications—the interminable desire which can be transcended only by surrender to the greater whole—he embraces explicitly:

¡En este hoy mío, cuánto ayer se vive!
Ya somos todos unos en mis ojos,
poblados de antiquísimos regresos.
¡Qué paz así! Saber que son los hombres,
un mirar que te mira,
con ojos siempre abiertos,
velándote: si un alma se les marcha
nuevas almas acuden a sus cercos.
Ahora, aquí, frente a ti, todo arrobado,
aprendo lo que soy: soy un momento
de esa larga mirada que te ojea
desde ayer, desde hoy, desde mañana,
paralela del tiempo.
En mis ojos, los últimos,
arde intacto el afán de los primeros,
herencia inagotable, afán sin término.
Posada en mí está ahora; va de paso.
Cuando de mí se vuela, allá en mis hijos
—la rama temblorosa que le tiendo—
hará posada. Y en sus ojos, míos,
ya nunca aquí, y aquí, seguiré viéndote.
Una mirada queda, si pasamos.
.....
Por venir a mirarla, día a día,
embeleso a embeleso,
tal vez tu eternidad,
vuelta luz, por los ojos se nos entre.

Y de tanto mirarte, nos salvemos. (31-end)

The full fruition of this recognition emerges in *Confianza*, a collection most of whose poems were written soon after *El contemplado* but set aside by Salinas, and not published until after his death. Despite the similarity between the two books, Salinas apparently felt the poetry of *Confianza* to be the capstone of his

work; and in fact at the end of his life he was again writing poems in the same vein. The unselfish posture which the poet reaches at the end of *El contemplado* leads with sure logic into the socially concerned poetry of *Todo más claro*, written during the same years as the other last books. Placing *Confianza* last also clarifies the poet's dialectical struggle to reach the "other side" of poetry's "reality" (as in *Razón de amor* he had reached the "other side" of love's) by its links to key images in *Todo más claro* which that book had picked up from the earlier poetry and recast in a new light. The alternative trajectory *El contemplado-Todo más claro-Confianza*, then, form the last links in a signifying chain. They mutually illuminate each other even while—or because—they acknowledge that they are links of life lived as finitude and expressed in a defiant and then exultant poetry of absence.

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¹ Cf. Ángel Lobera's *Los poemas de Pedro Salinas* (Madrid, 1982). Ver especialmente el capítulo "Introducción a un estudio de las prácticas de lectura de la poesía española del siglo XX" (p. 10-11). D.F. Lobera, *Los poemas de Pedro Salinas* (Madrid, 1982). Ver especialmente el capítulo "Introducción a un estudio de las prácticas de lectura de la poesía española del siglo XX" (p. 10-11). Barcelona: Espasa, 1984.

² Néstor García Castellón, *Los temas de un poeta: "Salinas"* (Madrid, 1964). Ver especialmente el capítulo "Introducción a un estudio de las prácticas de lectura de la poesía española del siglo XX" (p. 10-11). Madrid: Espasa, 1964.

³ Cf. Lobera's *Los poemas de Pedro Salinas* (Madrid, 1982).