

The Mystical Voice in Pedro Salinas's *La voz a ti debida*

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In the poetry of the “Generación del 27” we perceive a certain tension between the desire for fragmentation and the recognition of the poet as an iconic figure, and the traditional pull of essentialist spirituality. This tension seems to resolve itself in the work of Pedro Salinas, whose poetry we may describe as a “study of the Self” based on his apparent spiritual, personal, and professional balance (Allen 5). With this connection in mind, as well as the known focus on the self’s transformation and union with the lover in Salinas’ later work, we may then posit that a need to study the mystical voice exists in earlier works. In particular, a focus on a more commonly read and studied work, *La voz a ti debida*, could shed light on the phenomenon of a process leading toward a mystical union of the lovers in Salinas, along with the tensions in this mystical system that could find corollaries in more Contemporary Spanish and / or Iberian poetries.

La voz a ti debida, published in 1933, elaborates on the relationship of the poetic subject with his lost love. His notable obsession with love for “la mujer” has been studied and duly noted (Salinas 15). We may divide the work, compiled as a single, multi-strophic poem, in various sections: “el nacimiento de la pasión ... el clímax y la posesión de la amada ... [y] la despedida...” (15). By means of this process the poetic voice experiences “otra aventura poética, a través del amor [que] se vuelve vehículo que permite trascender al yo y proporciona una nueva aprehensión del mundo” (Chae 41).

We must note, beyond the simple scheme offered above, that the title of the work has been interpreted as the “contextualización del yo lírico que promete un canto de amor *post mortem* a la amada” (Corencia Cruz 86). I will argue in

this study that it is not the physical death of the lover to which Salinas' poetic subject refers, but rather, to the death of the lovers' union in what may be taken as an Iberian, mystical context such as that seen in other 20th Century texts.

Insofar as the previously studied notions of union of conscience and essentialist illumination are concerned, the possibility of a mystical interpretation within an existing framework (Simon, "Mysticism without Borders," 42) opens itself to us. Such a framework stems from an evolution of the seven-step, Sufi mystical process from that utilized by Ibn 'Arabi in the 13th Century, to the Christianized, sensual spirituality of San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa in the 16th Century, and toward an understanding of mystical union as an equalizing force for the feminine and female poetic voice in the work of Clara Janés. "The erotic, mystical path seen [in Janes' work] is reminiscent of the Sufi path studied in Janés' poetry ... [In the final poem of *Arcángel de Sombra*] we could see the final verses of the poem by the united poetic subject as an indication of an anti-hegemonic, pro-feminine discourse still alive through the fluidity of gender definitions in Janés' poetic subject..." (Simon, "Mysticism without Borders," 61-2). Thus, a process does exist, of which any reader of Golden Age Spanish literature would have been keenly aware upon reading more contemporary texts. In the Sufi version of this process, the creation of binary oppositions through the presence of contradicting symbols and metonymic relationships between objects allows the mystic to differentiate the mundane world (*Khalq*) from the sublime world in which the mystic is united with God (*Haqq*) (Simon, *Understanding*, 81). The mystic also must unite with the lover, ascribed with the characteristics of the "divine feminine" (Falconar 60). This combination of the two into one happens in a third space, "Alam-al-Mithal," (61), in which the sacred heart, or "qalb," forms to shelter the souls as they merge into one, divine being, illuminated then in the union with God. Later on, the various Christian and postmodern manifestations of the process take shape.

In more analytical terms, we may observe various similarities between this mystical process and certain well-studied aspects of *La voz a ti debida*. We may find symbols referencing Self (Allen 5) and Salvation (Fava 233) as mystical. For example, the use of “juegos léxicos” such as those between “los cuerpos y las sombras” (Chae 97) may give rise to the binary oppositions described above. Although these have already been noted in recent critical work (43-4), they are noted only for their fragmentary properties to the poem’s semiotic, rather than as a possible first step in an attempted union between the poetic subject and his lover, the poetic object. There is also the presence of sound to indicate state of completion (121), as well as the union of the two competing voices in a “proceso mutuo” (42), which could correspond to a perceived union of the lovers near the end. The creative, or “divine,” feminine is also present, noted in previous work (Allen 66-9) as well as directly from the text by Chae for the female lover’s kisses in their “efecto redentor” (Chae 95-96). In a different example, we may find the notion of purity which the poetic subject senses upon beginning down this apparently mystical path:

Iré rompiendo todo
lo que encima me echaron
desde antes de nacer.
Y vuelto ya al anónimo
eterno del desnudo,
de la piedra, del mundo,
te diré:
“Yo te quiero, soy yo.”
(Salinas 64)

These verses reveal not only the effect the lover’s presence has on the poetic subject in removing him from his mundane identity and purifying him, it also draws on the notion of the lovers’ union in verse 520 (64) with what could pass as a logical proof, “I love you, [thus] I am,” similar to the famous “cogito ergo sum” of Descartes.

From the perspective of active process, as opposed to other, more static images studied here, we may view the transformation of the lovers from two

individuals toward a single, unified self in the work. As Chae states, there is a “movimiento hacia el pasado y el mañana” (52), as well as the poetic subject’s discontent “al ver a la amada pasar constantemente por fases transformativas” (Chae 47-8). Mayoral makes plain this connection in *La voz a ti debida* when observing that “la mirada enamorada del poeta descubre y deja constancia de los pequeños cambios que suceden en el cuerpo amado” (35).

The poetic subject soon declares:

Qué alegría, vivir
sintiéndose vivido.
Rendirse
A la gran certidumbre, oscuramente,
De que otro ser, fuera de mí, muy lejos,
Me está viviendo.
(72)

Here we may observe the awareness of the mystical senses – the poetic subject feels the presence of someone greater who “is living me” as he himself feels life flow through him. This marks the beginning of what would be the period of transformation, through the act of joining with the female lover in a mystical context (in which sexual imagery is converted into mystical symbols, thus reducing the physical eroticism and replacing it with a more sublime form of love), which may take the poetic subject to a state of mystical illumination.

This transformation toward a higher state of being, or “platonización,” of the female lover (28) and the creation of a united self appears in the poetry of the late 20th Century Spanish poet Clara Janés, and in particular, in *Arcángel de sombra* as noted above. This mystical process of transformation and union through love should make sense, as “si la amada es la creadora de su propio cuerpo también los amantes son creadores del cuerpo...” (Mayoral 42).

In terms of particularly Sufi imagery, we find Spiritual / Haqq versus Khalq Imagery. Here we may find the dichotomies of light and dark, life and death, destruction and rebirth (Chae 42) which give rise to the mystical notion of the binary opposition. In returning to verses 201-209, the moment in which

the female lover repeats the word “mañana,” we may find that the spoken word itself takes on a mystical connotation. In Sufi (as well as posterior, Sufi-based imagery in Spanish –and Portuguese–) mystical poetics, the symbol of the lips (found in verse 223 of *La voz*) stands for the divine word (which only the divine feminine may utter) (Nurbakhsh, Vol. I, 114). It is from this word that illumination in the form of love may appear (IV, 14-15). By combining the movement toward this mystical “tomorrow” with the utterance of divine words, a process of poetic self-awareness reveals itself as leading toward the desired goal of attaining mystical knowledge through love. As I have discussed in other studies, the combination of carnal love with the assumedly purer, spiritual love of Sufi tradition, is a hallmark of Iberian mystical texts (Simon, *Understanding*, 92). As such, we may establish not only an indirect connection between the “symbolic experience” of which Rupert Allen speaks, but also of a direct relationship of these symbols with a well-developed mystical process in Iberian poetry.

This experience seems to develop into the kind of spiritual envelopment between the lovers / the mystic and his guide as the poem moves forward. The poetic subject penetrates the protective shell of the guide, finding the notion of essential truth through the love he feels for her:

Se maduran los mundos
tras de su fortaleza.
Nada se puede ver
ni tocar. Sonrosada
o morena, la piel
disfranza levemente
la defensa absoluta
del ser último. Besos
me entregas y dulzuras
esenciales del mundo,
en su fruto redondo,
aquí en los labios. Pero
cuando toco tu frente
con mi frente, te siento,
la amada más distante,
la más última, esa
que ha de durar, secreta,

cuando pasen los labios,
sus besos. Salvación
—fría, dura en la tierra—
del gran contacto ardiente
que esta noche consume.
(Salinas 106-07)

The comparison with San Juan de la Cruz's "La noche oscura del alma" should be evident; the moment of contact between the lovers is replete with the kind of binary oppositions commonly found in mystical texts of the 20th Century in the Iberian context. Among them, the most important is that of the harsh, hardened exterior against the "secret" the lover protects. This secret, which passes beyond the "cold, hard" life in the earth –which we may assume to signify death– is the element with which the mystic looks to join, that of the feminine essence. It is this essence which allows the mystic, according to the mystical process seen here and elsewhere (that is, until Janés's groundbreaking *Arcángel de sombra*, a work which inverts the male-female dichotomy in this process) to achieve union with the divine and, thus, illumination.

We must comment, however, on the most salient element of the mystical process as it appears in *La voz a ti debida*, that is, its incompleteness. In the following verses the poetic subject views the lover in terms of absence and non-corporeality, not as a function of the sublime and illuminated but as one of distance and intangibility:

¿Y si no fueran las sombras
sombras? ¿Si las sombras fueran
—yo las estrecho, las beso,
me palpitan encendidas
entre los brazos—
cuerpos finos y delgados,
todos miedosos de carne?

¿Y si hubiese
otra luz en el mundo
para sacarles a ellas,
cuerpos ya de sombra, otras

sombras más últimas, sueltas
de color, de forma, libres
de sospecha de materia;
y que no se viesen ya
y que hubiera que buscarlas
a ciegas, por entre cielos,
desdeñando ya las otras,
sin escuchar ya las voces
de esos cuerpos disfrazados
de sombras, sobre la tierra?
(Salinas 122)

These verses happen upon the reader as though the great weight which has lifted off of the poetic subject in his attempt toward an illuminated, mystical experience were that of the mystical other, the guide whose presence is absolutely necessary for the mystic to achieve union. Here the aforementioned and heavily emphasized transformation turns impossible, since the “lover” is not present; only the shadow, an empty memory of the self, remains. In the second of the two stanzas the poetic subject attempts to equate shadows with the aforementioned divine essence, perhaps in a vain attempt to recover the all but lost process of illumination. His admission, nonetheless, that this attempt would be “blind, among clouds, ... without hearing the voices anymore / of those disguised bodies ...” makes the reader aware that the act would be a desperate one that could result in the poetic subject’s excision from the world in which he started.

In the final verses of the collection, the poetic subject states:
Y su afanoso sueño
de sombras, otra vez, será el retorno
a esta corporeidad mortal y rosa
donde el amor inventa su infinito
(Salinas 123).

This return to the mundane appears in more recent mystical poetic work. In fact, looking diachronically, when we compare with the poetry of Jesús Jiménez Reinaldo (Simon, “The Mystic,” 101), we observe the “imposibilidad” of total union with the lover to which even the verses previous to these have lead.

This impossibility, connected directly with the same binary oppositions that should have united the lovers, appears from other critical voices as well:

“Las dificultades de este amor y la imposibilidad de una unión completa para siempre aparecen ya en *La voz a ti debida*. El poeta, incluso en los momentos más íntimos, es consciente de la imposibilidad de la unión total. Esa última resistencia al amor la encontramos simbolizada en la frente de la amada... El amor, que es cantado muchas veces como pura celebración gozosa, es, al mismo tiempo, un amor condenado a la ocultación, a la ausencia, a las separaciones, a la distancia. Y mientras ella se empeña en destruir esas dificultades, él es consciente de la existencia entre ellos de un ‘no indestructible y negro,’ de una imposibilidad de poder vivir siempre unidos.”

(Mayoral 37, 40)

Allen describes the love poetry of Salinas as a self-proclaimed “earthbound” poetic (149), not attempting to reach so far as a sublime illumination. This ephemeral root creates yet another interpretable binary opposition within the measurable life of the poet – Salinas chooses to remain in the mundane world despite the opportunities to reach the sublime in his poetry. This reminds us of the mystical process in Joaquim Pessoa’s *Os Olhos de Isa* (Eng., *The Eyes of Isa*). This Portuguese poet eventually does reach illumination through what we could describe as a technicality in the system, then returning (in a rather Platonic fashion) to aid others in their quest for the sublime (Simon, *Understanding*, 109-110). This technicality, that of utilizing the “name” of the lover as a way to “contemplate the divine through a small piece of that divine, which is found in the lover’s name” (107), exists due to the symbolic significance of the name when referring to the female lover / divine feminine. In this context, her name becomes part of the totality of divine knowledge (Nurbakhsh, Vol. XV, 23-24). In the case of *La voz a ti debida*, we find the following statement in verses 299-305:

Si tú no tuvieras nombre,
todo sería primero,
inicial, todo inventado

por mí,
intacto hasta el beso mío.
Gozo, amor: delicia lenta
de gozar, de amar, sin nombre.
(Salinas 58).

Here, the symbol of the name takes on the meaning described above. However, we must note as evident that the poetic subject realization that he must remain within the physical realm of love, even wishing the mystical process could not have taken place so as not to have suffered its denial. Given the similarities with later 20th Century mystical and anti-mystical tendencies noted here, this seemingly contradictory statement actually makes some sense.

Inasmuch as these direct connections with other Iberian mystical voices exist, others have made unexpected appearances, as well. The poetry of José Ángel Valente reveals, after Machín Lucas' exhaustive study on the topic, a variety of influences from Sufi mysticism as translated, or as he puts it, "filtradas," through the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa (Machín 91), as well as by critical interpretations of these texts (93-4). As we cannot necessarily determine any other connection than that of Salinas' academic background, it is possible to conclude the probable shared knowledge, diachronic differences aside, between the two, making such knowledge within the Iberian sphere a more evidently understood and inheritable one than general criticism may have previously thought.

The comparison with Jiménez Reinaldo, Joaquim Pessoa, and Clara Janés is not an arbitrary one; it refers us to a more overreaching process in Spanish and Portuguese societies as reflected in Iberian letters. The application of Paradigm Shift theory to the social and artistic changes occurring in the Peninsula since around 1950 has already appeared in current critical work (Simon, "The Paradigm Shift"). According to the theory, as a paradigm begins to fail in its mission to provide a framework by which one may understand the world, we may experience a breakdown of the currently

accepted methods of expression. This has happened on various occasions throughout modern history; the creator of the theory, Thomas Kuhn, used the example of the discovery of oxygen as a way of understanding this breakdown (Kuhn 23-4). The theory has appeared in numerous literary studies, starting with Easthope's article on Forster and the possibility that literary works from the early to mid-20th Century could have signaled the beginning of the end for what we have termed the Modern paradigm (93). Although Salinas obviously wrote *La voz a ti debida* several decades before the works of poets such as Janés, Pessoa, or Reinaldo had appeared, we may observe in the collection that the roots of deconstruction through fragmentation, although still very much within the limits of the iconic voice, reveal a seemingly contradictory relationship between the essentialist view of poetry as part of a "master narrative," and the poetic object as a function of a larger, disjointed, and un-united world. Although markedly *not* postmodern (for the reasons listed above), as a precursor to activities later subversive to the "master narrative" we may highlight Salinas' poetry. In terms of the Paradigm Shift, then, *La voz a ti debida* may serve, along with other period texts, signal a heightened awareness of Modernity's struggle to continue defining a world whose essential socio-philosophical no longer fit within its own.

In conclusion, there exists the possibility of mystical voice within Salinas' poetic discourse, and in particular, in his work *La voz a ti debida*. By way of an analysis of Salinas' imagery, symbols, and transformatory poetics, this process moves from a purely philosophical one to a clearly mystical one. It also finds a connection with later poetries, opening the door to perhaps a greater richness of links between 20th Century mystical poets and their ever-evolving social context than was previously thought.

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