**UCLA**
**Mester**

**Title**
The Poet in La voz a ti debida : A Life in Transition

**Permalink**
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/75n0x5w4

**Journal**
Mester, 14(1)

**Author**
McConnell, Kathy

**Publication Date**
1986

**DOI**
10.5070/M3141013710

**Copyright Information**
Copyright 1986 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at https://escholarship.org/terms

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

# The Poet in *La voz a ti debida:* A Life in Transition

Since its publication in 1933, Pedro Salinas' *La voz a ti debida* has continued to raise questions about the reality of the experience of love found in the text. Earlier critics, such as Leo Spitzer, discredit its genuineness. Spitzer believes that the *amada* is like an alter-ego for the poet. She is not real but rather a pure concept. Spitzer as well as Darmangeat assert that there is no biographical basis for the work.[1]

More recent criticism has tended to defend the authenticity of the experience of love. In his critique, R. G. Harvard argues for its reality by demonstrating its adherence to literary tradition, that of courtly love. It establishes the *amada* as a human being, it asserts her influence as muse, and it reveals her as a medium through which the poet's ideas are symbolized.[2]

Likewise, Julian Palley is convinced of the veracity of the beloved and of the experience. The opening lines of his article *"La voz a ti debida:* An Appreciation" leave no doubt in the reader's mind:

> *La voz a ti debida* . . . is a long meditation on the reality of the beloved. It is a hymn in praise of the beloved. It is the victory of love-Being-over the Nada, Non-Being.[3]

The poet himself acknowledges that the circumstances of the poem exhibit truthfulness. He writes:

> Ha sido, ocurrió, es verdad. (127)
> Fue en un día, fue una fecha
> que le marca tiempo al tiempo.[4]

A few lines later we witness another reference to the brevity of the affair:

> ¿No se la habrá caído (254)
> a un tres, a un nueve
> de este agosto que empieza?

Salinas' apparent vagueness about names, dates and times, says John Crispin, can be attributed to the author's desire to be discreet. "Discretion is one reason, but a more compelling one is the wish to make the poem transcend his individual experience as a general statement on the paradoxical nature of love."[5]

The purpose of this study will be to examine some of Salinas' individual experiences, what his attitude toward his beloved in the poem reveals to us about him, and how that psychological reality presents a verisimilar experience with which the reader can identify.

In order to accomplish this task, we must first consider some biographical data on the author. Salinas was born on November 27, 1891 in Madrid, where he spent most of his early life. He attended schools there and received a Licentiate in Letters in 1913. From 1914 to 1917 he lived in Paris where, at the Sorbonne, he taught and did research for the doctoral dissertation. In 1915, at the age of twenty-four, he married Margarita Bonmati. The next few years found him engaged in many activities: teaching at the university level, publishing criticism, prose and verse in magazines and newspapers, and writing several books. In the year 1933 when *La voz a ti debida* was published, Salinas was forty-two, and well established in his profession as a writer, critic and researcher.

From the standpoint of psychological development, Salinas was at a critical point in his life, that stage which some psychologists label as the mid-life transition period. The years from 40 to 45 represent the time of transition from early adulthood into middle adulthood; it is a period of reappraisal. Erick Erickson identifies it as a time when a man faces generativity or stagnation.[6]

Daniel Levinson explains that the tasks for a man during this period involve the integration of various polarities: Young–Old, Destruction–Creation, Masculine–Feminine, and Attachment–Separation. The manner in which this integration takes place is dependent upon the man's relationship to himself and to his external world. It can be a period of mild or severe crisis for the individual.

Major changes can take place during this stage: divorce, remarriage, major shifts in occupation, a marked decline in the level of functioning or a notable increase in creativity. A man must face his past, present, and future and all the grief or joy that this entails.[7] Levinson adds that:

> . . . the central issue at mid-life is coming to terms with one's own mortality: a man must learn now, more deeply than was possible before, that his own death is inevitable and that he and others are capable of great destructiveness.8

The text of *La voz a ti debida* reveals the author's struggle with all of these polarities, but particularly with those of Young–Old and Destruction–Creation. The first person perspective discloses an intimate and touching crisis with its myriad of vacillating emotions. Indeed, for a man whose family was of great importance to him, an understandable conflict had arisen. Although he was aware of the futility of his relationship with a younger woman, he seemed to be, at times, ruled by his

emotions. Perhaps we can better understand his predicament by reviewing some of the psychological processes that are believed to take place during the mid-life transition and which appear to be played out within the lines of the poem.

For a man one of the common manifestations of this period is a sense of dissatisfaction with his marriage. He may find another woman who seems more understanding or who is sensually more provocative. Levinson writes that:

> A man at this age may enter a serious love relationship with a younger woman. . . . It reflects a man's struggles with the Young–Old polarity: he is asserting his youthful vitality at a time when he fears that the young in him is being crushed by the dry, dying Old.[9]

Youth as an archetypal symbol exhibits itself in the poet's beloved. She represents possibility, initiation, energy and creativity. On the other hand, her tender age underlines her imperfect development, impulsiveness, lack of experience and her insensitivity.

The poet, representing Age, projects himself outwardly as wiser, more rational, and accomplished. This contrasts with the inner feeling of doubt, fear, and anxiety that he experiences in the relationship. He portrays himself as a "sombra" which symbolizes his mortality:

Y nunca te equivocaste, (30)
más que una vez, una noche
que te encaprichó una sombra
. . . .
Una sombra parecía.
Y la quisiste abrazar.
Y era yo.

The mention of the woman's age, "arma de veinte años", suggests danger and emphasizes the poet's awareness of the generational gap. She, the symbol of youth, is helping to maintain his illusion of immortality. He is aware that it is an illusion when he writes:

Y entonces viniste tú (330)
de lo oscuro, iluminada
de joven paciencia honda
. . . .
tú, tan joven para mí.

In his mind, he constantly struggles with the archetypal image of youth; he is literally captivated and swept away by her. He seems disconnected from his own world and she alone remains to give stability to

his life; she is "la luz lenta y segura" (420). In one instance, he is willing to give up everything for her: "lo daría todo, todo lo tiraría" (104). He cannot believe that she actually cares for him and that seems to overwhelm him: "No, no puedo creer que seas para mí," (1792).

The beloved's sensuality is a strong attraction for the author. The concrete descriptions of her physical characteristics present her as a sensual being; he emphasizes the parts of her body: "tierno cuerpo rosado", "me sobran los ojos y los labios", or:

Lanzas palabras veloces, (1239)
. . . .
invitándome
estoy mirando
los labios donde nacieron.

There are references to her as a seductress, a siren, and to his desire to possess her physically: "Me iré, me iré con ella a amarnos," (268), "...y veré que ahora sí es mía, ya." (283)

In spite of his infatuation with her, his age and wisdom eventually enable him to recognize that she has become too important to him:

Distánciamela, espejo: (1828)
trastorna su tamaño.
A ella, que llena el mundo,
hazla menuda, mínima.

The illusion of perfection is destroyed by the generational gap between the two. It is here that the poet wavers between criticism and praise. It is difficult for him to accept her imperfections as they relate to him. At the risk of offending her, he apologizes for looking for more depth in her character:

Perdóname por ir buscándote (1449)
tan torpemente, dentro
de ti.
Perdóname el dolor, alguna vez.
Es que quiero sacar
de ti tu mejor tú.

His criticism becomes stronger later as his frustration level rises:

Y seguirás viviendo (1530)
alegre,
. . . .
estás siempre cercada

de ansias, de afán, de anhelos,
. . . .
eso que tú no ves
ni puedes contestar.

R. G. Harvard affirms the authenticity of the poet's behavior when he says: "It is not surprising that the older male, faced with the real problem of how to cope with a relatively young woman, should waver in his attitude, once apologetic, other times censorious of her levity."[10]

Indeed, the author seems confused about his role. He oscillates between lover, father, and mentor. As Levinson points out: "It is hard to combine mentoring and romance for long. . . . Like anyone in the recipient position, she must in time grow up and go out on her way, or her development will be impaired."[11]

The *amada*'s changeability is another aspect that reminds the poet of the age difference. She is constantly changing, a source of energy and light. He views himself as darkness, as invisible, anonymous, and stagnant. Again, the contrast is significant and it keeps the poet off balance and unsure of his relationship with her:

¿O seré sólo algo (188)
que nació para un día
tuyo (mi día eterno),
. . . .

Overlapping somewhat with the Youth–Age contrast is the manifestation of the Destruction–Creation polarity with which the author seems to be wrestling. At the mid-life transition point this tends to become intensified. A man's "growing wish to be creative is accompanied by a greater awareness of the destructive forces in nature, in human life generally, and in himself."[12] He must come to a new understanding of his grievances against those closest to him whether those complaints be real or imagined.

The poet's reaction to the way his beloved treats him manifests itself in these two extremes. On one hand, she is a destructive force within his life; on the other, she represents inspiration and creativity.

The poet sees the apparent control that the beloved has over him as destructive and that clearly threatens him. The difficulty that he has in accepting his own feelings causes him to assign responsibility to her for his grief. The projection of his feelings onto her only exacerbates his own sense of self doubt, paranoia and pessimism.[13] He tries to compensate for his projections by looking for positive attributes within her that influence his life. This fluctuation between extremes is indicative of the intrapsychic conflict to which the poet has subjected himself.

As the text reveals, the power invested in the woman seems to be all-encompassing. She maintains destructive powers on two levels: as a universal destructive force, and as a destructive force to him personally. Her universal power strikes like a bolt of lightning without warning and destroys whatever is in its path:

Porque cuando ella venga (69)
desatada, implacable,
para llegar a mí,
murallas, nombres, tiempo,
se quebrarían todos,
. . . .

Here, as Carlos Feal Deibe notes, the *amada* has become like a cosmic being, one incapable of true human love. Deibe writes: ". . . la amada es símbolo del amor, pero el amor no ama, quien ama son las personas. . ."[14] Other passages corroborate the universality of this destructive power:

Aplasta (542)
bajo sus pies ligeros
la paciencia y el mundo
Y lo llena de ruinas
. . . .

The poet directs these lines to his audience as if to warn it of the destructive capacity of love as a universal force.

When the poet directly addresses his beloved, he criticizes her specifically for not meeting his personal expectations and needs:

Empújame, lánzame (1139)
desde ti, de tus mejillas,
como de islas de coral,
. . . a buscar
fuera de ti lo que tienes,
lo que no me quieres dar.

His negative portrayal sees her as whimsical, insensitive, and shallow. He sees himself as the helpless victim:

No sirve para amada (1215)
tú siempre ganarás
. . . .
Amante, amada, no.

Making her responsible for his happiness reflects an immature but understandable reaction for one caught up in intrapsychic conflict. George Valliant asserts that this type of behavior is common in adults with depressive illness. "For the user these mechanisms usually alter distress caused by other people [particularly lovers]—either their presence or their loss. When these defenses are used to resolve conflict among conscience, reality, and instincts, the integration is imperfect."[15]

Since we are not allowed to hear the beloved's response to the accusations, it is not clear whether they are justified or not. What his personal complaints do reveal is a man trying to grapple with a painful situation for which there can be no happy ending. Facing the loss of the "happily ever after" illusion is a difficult task for anyone. Part of the painful midlife transition involves this process of casting off one's illusions. Myths that were created at earlier developmental stages must be readdressed.

On the positive side, the *amada* symbolizes both a universal and personal force of creativity for the poet. Universally she symbolizes the mother of life in an edenic garden on earth. Personally, she is the poetic muse that enables and inspires him to fight against the stagnating forces of age. The *amada* illuminates the *sombra* and gives meaning to his life by eliminating the feeling of *nada*.

In "¡Qué gran víspera el mundo!", we witness a scene in which the beloved becomes the cosmic force behind creation, "where at her whim cities, ports, machines, words and even the poet come into being."[16]

El gran mundo vacío (480)
sin empleo, delante de ti estaba: su impulso
se lo darías tú.
Y junto a ti, vacante,
. . . .
yo, esperando.

This idea agrees with the poet's struggle for immortality. On a higher plane, she literally provides and sustains life. Indeed, he stands in awe of her power.

On a more personal level, she is the power behind his own creativity, his poetic inspiration. We must remember that a man at this developmental stage wants to be productive. "The creative impulse is not merely to 'make something'. It is to bring something into being, to give birth, to generate life."[17] Thus, a poem is a creation, but a poet must be inspired. Salinas writes:

Los besos que me das (1588)
Son siempre rendiciones:
tú besas hacia arriba,
librando algo de mí,

que aún estaba sujeto
en los fondos oscuros.

Not only does she breathe life into him, but she is the catalyst that unleashes his creative power.

Here as well as in other passages, I believe that the author is able to see the relationship with more perspective. The destructive and creative forces within the *amada* are symbolically tied to the author in a spiritual and mystical union. The poet and the *amada* become reflections of each other. They are now united by a sense of mutuality:

Qué alegría, vivir (792)
sintiéndose vivido.
. . . .
de que otro ser, fuera de mí, muy lejos,
me está viviendo.

She represents to him those elements which make up nature, and a balance of the two is essential to the harmony and evolution of the world. The identification with the beloved, then, inadvertently links him intimately to the two polarities that exist not only in the *amada* and himself, but also throughout all of nature.

After the spiritual union is lost and total estrangement occurs, the poet is forced to face himself and his pain. The emotional reality of the pain is not softened and can be rather disquieting for the reader, for we have been able to empathize with him throughout the experience.

The last few lines reveal a man experiencing a profound sense of loss, one who is trying to pick up the pieces and who, out of necessity, must reassess the situation. The dream as it existed, is dead; the illusion of immortality is now only a *sombra*, but this *sombra* has enabled the author to reappraise the situation and to find new meaning in it. The power of love (both destructive and creative) forged with the author's creativity "can create its own *'infinito'*."[18]

Kathy McConnell
University of California,
Los Angeles

NOTES

1. John Crispin, *Pedro Salinas* (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 62.
2. R. G. Harvard, "Pedro Salinas and Courtly Love," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 56 (1979), p. 124.
3. Julian Palley, " 'La voz a ti debida': An Appreciation," *Hispania*, 40 (1957), p. 450.

4. Pedro Salinas, *La voz a ti debida* (Madrid: Castalia, 1982), p. 53. All subsequent references will be indicated by line number.

5. Crispin, p. 62.

6. Erik Erickson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), pp. 247–274.

7. Daniel Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 26.

8. Levinson, p. 196.

9. Levinson, p. 258.

10. Harvard, p. 127.

11. Levinson, p. 238–39.

12. Levinson, p. 223.

13. For a discussion of defense mechanisms, see George Vaillant, *Adaptation to Life* (Boston: Brown, 1977), pp. 73–158.

14. Carlos Feal Deibe, *La poesía de Pedro Salinas* (Madrid: Gredos, 1965), p. 85.

15. Vaillant, p. 83.

16. Harvard, p. 131.

17. Levinson, p. 222.

18. Palley, p. 455.