

My Voice Because of You and Letter Poems to Katherine

[Pedro Salinas](#)



Translated with an Introduction by Willis Barnstone, with a Foreword by Jorge Guillén, and an Afterword by Enric Bou

256 pages | 3 halftones, 1 line drawing | 6 x 9 | © 2010

Cloth \$35.00 ISBN: 9780226734262 Published May 2010

When Pedro Salinas's 1933 collection of love poems, *La voz a ti debida*, was introduced to American audiences in Willis Barnstone's 1975 English translation, it was widely regarded as the greatest sequence of love poems written by a man or a woman, in any language, in the twentieth century. Now, seventy-five years after its publication, the reputation of the poems and its multifaceted writer remains untarnished. A portrait of their era, the poems, from a writer in exile from his native civil war-torn Spain, now reemerge in our time.

In this new, facing-page bilingual edition, Barnstone has added thirty-six poems written in the form of letters from Salinas to his great love, Katherine Whitmore. Discovered years later, these poems were written during and after the composition of *La voz* and, though disguised as prose, have all the rhythms and sounds of lineated lyric poetry. Taken together, the poems and letters are a history, a dramatic monologue, and a crushing and inevitable ending to the story of a man consumed by his love and his art.

Bolstered by an elegant foreword by Salinas's contemporary, the poet Jorge Guillén, and a masterly afterword by the Salinas scholar, Enric Bou, that considers the poet and his legacy for twenty-first century world poetry, *Love Poems by Pedro Salinas* will be cause for celebration throughout the world of verse and beyond.

Pedro Salinas: Between the Old and the New

Pedro Salinas was a leading figure in Spain's literary scene in the years before the civil war. Among his most significant achievements one can mention his prolific activities as a literature professor, poet, short story writer, novelist, dramatist, and essayist. He was also a literary critic with an unrivaled dedication to the art of letter writing, and founder of the *Universidad Internacional* in Santander (1933–36). He was both witness to and an active participant of the II Spanish Republic of 1931. Like no other poet of his group (the so-called Generation of 1927), he was able to excel in many different fields, while pursuing an intellectual and administrative career. But like many others he also fell prey to the militarist brutality of the era and decided to go into exile.

As a witness to a world in uproar, in America Salinas discovered and wholeheartedly explored a radically distinct reality that he recorded with his always sharp and intricately thoughtful pen. The books and letters he wrote at Wellesley College and at Johns Hopkins, or while traveling through the United States and the Americas, not only capture the profound social transformations in, for him, the new continents, but paint a revelatory portrait of the author himself. Here we have a recently escaped inhabitant of artistically vital but chaotic old-world Madrid, suddenly on his own as a literary exile in the New World. Possessing a Borgesean memory, a few books, elementary English, and an indomitable literary imagination, Salinas threw himself into poems, plays, fiction, and a multitude of letters. These writings shrewdly document the zeitgeist of the isolated but outstanding Spanish artist-intellectual and are scattered among several fine American universities. The *republicanos*, exiles from democratic Spain like Salinas, had the singular duty of recreating their oeuvre and their lives, while keeping alive a Spain that was, and that was now being transformed into the vengeful fascist regime of Generalísimo Francisco Franco, Cacique of Spain by the grace of God. In these refugees we have a panoply of nascent pre-war Spain, including Tomás Navarro Tomás and Jorge Guillén in the States, Juan Ramón Jiménez in Puerto Rico, Luis Cernuda and Luis Buñuel in Mexico, and Rafael

Alberti and José Ortega y Gasset in Argentina. They did not dry up any more than Chopin did in fleeing occupied Poland or Joyce in escaping religion-heavy Ireland. Indeed, the concordant and enormous artistic production of these decades represents a universalizing triumph of the last Spanish diaspora.

*

The Spanish essayist and philosopher María Zambrano speaks of the 1920s and '30s as a defining moment in Spanish culture, a "historical moment," a staggering crossroad of transformations, a peak period of intense literary and artistic renovation. She called it a "Silver Age" in Spanish culture—the sequel to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century "Golden Age" of John of the Cross, Greco, and Cervantes. This fertile new period was abruptly interrupted by the civil war. In poetry, the vindication of a series of forgotten classical figures (Góngora and Garcilaso) occurred, along with more contemporary writers (such as Gustavo Bécquer, Rubén Darío, and Juan Ramón Jiménez) who were echoes in the formation of the new poetic voices. The older *modernista* poets professed artistic purity and melodic poetic form, but the next generation, that of the '27 authors, needed more than the exquisite, the French in Spanish dress. They were an avant-garde. With great dexterity they also experimented with form, old and new, and they looked to the experimental Mallarmean "Book" as a way to organize their poetry. Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, and Miguel Hernández were imbued with medieval popular song and ballad, the *poesía* popular of Andalusia and Castille. Salinas and Jorge Guillén, among others, wrote luminous intellectual constructs where everyday life shone under new light. Vicente Aleixandre and Luis Cernuda, the Alexandrian Cavafys of their day, transformed a world of secluded ignominious love into an astonishing, subjugated nature-based imagery. All the poets indulged in a vindication of new images. Ortega wrote, "Today's poetry is the superior algebra of metaphors."¹ They were into intemporality and aesthetic transcendence. So they were many and with many forms of freshness: universality and cosmopolitanism, popular and traditional poetry, and by the 1930s surrealism and engaged literature. The civil war, the huge uprooting, and its aftermath changed everything.

The 1920s in Spain saw a diffusion of new poetical attitudes through anthologies, manifestos, journals, and publishing houses. The celebration of Góngora's centennial in 1927 signified a moment of strength for a

1. José Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1925).

group of young writers, and this moment defined enduring friendships, even some with few literary affinities. No matter: the mood was one of great enthusiasm for art. But with the coming of the 1936–39 war and WWII, everything came to a dramatic halt. The options were life and art under dictatorship or in exile. But in Pedro Salinas we have old Spain and the itinerant wanderer of what was, during the colonial period called *La Nueva España* (the new Spain).

*

Willis Barnstone is a fine translator and reader of poetry. His rendition of Salinas's letters as poems is truly a wonderful achievement. He has discerned poems contained in the letters and he has been able to render them as such. His feat stresses both the poet Barnstone's facility to recognize poems concealed in Salinas's prose letters, and also his ability to deal in a sophisticated, original way with the inferences of love. But in doing so, Barnstone reminds us of the way the Spanish author, who has been encapsulated for posterity as a poet, pioneered innovative ways of expression and inquiry into human feelings. And Pedro Salinas was more than the poet of love, "the deepest human adventure," as Barnstone puts it; in his work he went beyond providing lines and quotes for speechless lovers in need of speech. To read Pedro Salinas's work under the limited light of twentieth-century love poetry, no matter what the depth and sophistication of his achievements, is a disservice to his reputation. Salinas, a modern intellectual, first in Spain and later in the United States, took a complex and contradictory way as he floated off in the uplifting word.

To broaden the perspective on Salinas—beyond his skilful and innovative mastery of love poetry—allows the reader to perceive a modern intellectual who grew up and lived for years in a landscape of provincial limitations set by the Spanish society of the early twentieth century. Indeed, he was a leader in a group of intellectuals who set higher standards for their country. Aiming at modernity, he fought against the conservative mood, against the Iberian caveman mentality. In favor of radical change, Salinas wrote most of his literary work against all odds. But he would pursue a dual objective. Like Rilke's *Angelus Novus* (angel of history), he looked backward without forgetting about the past while walking forward toward the future. Salinas is fascinated with the wonders of modernity. In a playful way, he incorporated this interest into his work. In a sort of fatal attraction toward machinery and artifacts, he wrote splendid poems, such as the one devoted to "Underwood girls." He perceives the letters of a typewriter as a chorus line dancing in front of the writer when

doing his work. Having lived in Paris from 1912 to 1915, Salinas was aware, long before other Spanish writers, of the avant-gardes and their radical aesthetics. One of his impressions of Paris reflects his dual attitude: “Es hermoso, esto. Es como todo París, tradición y modernidad, raíz y hoja fresca.” (This is beautiful. It is like everything in Paris, tradition and modernity, roots and new leaves.)²

When he was exiled in the United States, he was surprised in a positive way by New York’s gruesome aspect. The poetic rendering of his impressions are a variation on Federico García Lorca’s reaction in *Poet in New York* (1929), or Julio Camba’s depiction as “ciudad automática” (automated city) (1930). Salinas perceived the city’s gloomy modernity as a sign of a different civilization, one marked by machines and intense solitude, a solitude in a forest of skyscrapers that he had envisioned in one of his best avant-garde prose pieces, “Entrada en Sevilla” (Entry into Seville), which describes an aerial vision from within a space in the threshold of transformation from town to city. A letter from 1935 expresses his fascination with the new experiences offered by Modernity, and reflects an attitude that he never abandoned. In the letter, in which he describes traveling by car at night from Madrid to Guadarrama as he listens to the radio, a concert broadcast from a distant central European concert hall, and encounters the flashing lights from other cars, Salinas expresses his happiness at “the new.”³ His characteristic “desire for clarity” can be traced in *Todo más claro* (Everything clearer) (1949), a set of long poems devoted to the encounter between a city of the mind, one that he recognizes in nature, on the one hand, and in Modernity, on the other. Yet, while he embraced the positive changes of a new technological age, he was also aware of its unprecedented danger. Extremely pessimistic in tone, he devotes an entire section, “Cero” (Zero), to the fear of the atomic bomb. Reflecting this mixed attitude of attraction and alarm toward modernity in other poems in the same collection, he refers to New York’s electric billboards as some sort of new constellation of stars.

Salinas had a contradictory outlook representative of a changing worldview: he was in favor (but with some reservations) of Modernity, its new, city-centered world, its bourgeois attitudes and rationalist implications. He was torn between life’s variety and the difficulty to grasp it in calculated terms; he was convinced of the need for rationality as a way of controlling nature. As a traveler, lover, writer, and professor, he always expressed this unfathomable contradiction. His life was determined

2. Pedro Salinas, *Epistolario Completo. Obras Completas III*, edited by Enric Bou and Andrés Soria Olmedo (Madrid: Cátedra, 2007), 105.

3. *Ibid.*, 473–74.

by his curiosity. Thus his intimate friend Jorge Guillén defined him in these words:

Salinas, que conocía muy bien las alturas supremas, era un incesante Colón de Indias anónimas, de esos aciertos que la vida no catalogada propone al desgaire en este o el otro minuto.

. . .

Salinas, who knew high culture very well, was an incessant Columbus of the anonymous Indies, of those surprises that non-catalogued life provides inadvertently at any moment.⁴

Salinas lamented on many occasions his situation as a Spanish exile in an English-speaking country. He complained particularly about the irony of writing theater and not being able to see it performed:

Aquí estoy *lejos de todo*: el mundo literario y teatral me es desconocido. . . . En España mi nombre literario me abriría todas las puertas; aquí no tengo nombre, sino entre unos pocos enterados de lo español.

. . .

Here I am *far from everything*: the literary or theater world is unknown to me. . . . In Spain my literary name would open any door; here I do not have a name, except for a few people familiar with Spanish literature.⁵

He lived a desperate situation. After arriving in Wellesley in 1936, he wrote fourteen plays, of which he only saw one performed, a few months before his death, by a group of Barnard College students. In his lifetime, Salinas experienced frustration in not finding an audience for his literary production in the United States because of the lack of translations. The only exceptions would be the volume of essays *Reality and the Poet in Spanish Poetry*, which was the result of the 1937 Turnbull lectures at Johns Hopkins University; and three anthologies of his poetry, translated by Eleanor Turnbull: *Lost Angel and Other Poems* (1938), *Truth of Two and Other Poems* (1940), and *Sea of San Juan: A Contemplation* (1950). A shrewd literary critic in newspapers and in the Centro de Estudios Históricos (Center for historical studies) before the war, he devoted considerable attention

4. Jorge Guillén, "Elogio De Pedro Salinas," in *Pedro Salinas*, ed. Andrew Debicki (Madrid: Editorial Taurus, 1976), 31.

5. Salinas, *Epistolario Completo*, 570.

to the emerging poets of his time (Alberti and Aleixandre, among others). In the United States, his essays in *El defensor* (The defender) (1947) are sharp inquiries into topics of the time: language, letter writing, and readership.

*

Willis Barnstone's discovery of the poems hiding in Salinas's letters to Katherine Whitmore points to the importance that letter writing held for Salinas in life and in his writings, in theory *and* in practice. The third volume of the recent 2007 edition of Salinas's complete works contains a selection of a mere thousand letters, the tip of the iceberg of a strenuous, lifetime activity. Letters are like diaries (as noted by Maurice Blanchot); they are glimpses of future books, crucial annotated information about the *work in progress*. In Salinas's case, it is the kind of writing that allows the reader to witness, according to Claudio Guillén, Salinas's "multiplicity."⁶ Through the letters, one discovers the dimensions of Salinas's "debts" of affection to friends and family, his "atenciones" (attentions), as Jorge Guillén says. But at the same time the letters offer a glimpse into Salinas's honesty as a writer. His radicalism pushed him to write even the most obscure bureaucratic memo with a refinement and dedication unheard of in the genre. In one of his most celebrated essays, *Defensa de la carta misiva y de la correspondencia epistolar* (A defense of the letter and letter writing) (1947), he put forward the idea that a letter is always a document of intimacy, always searching for a reader — "su encanto específico y su razón de lectura" (its specific charm and the reason for reading it).⁷ Public knowledge and the distribution of private letters is essential in exploring the work of a writer with such diverse activities; in letter writing, voice and inscription become very comparable, and complete a dialectical relationship between two forces: presence and absence. Pedro Salinas became a master of this operation of enhancing absence through presence on the printed page, relating lived life and a written one. Writing letters became for him a way of establishing this continuity. On one occasion, in 1931, reporting to Jorge Guillén about a lecture tour he had done in Europe, he said, "Esto ya no era viaje, era vida con fondo de viaje" (This was not a trip, but life lived as a trip).⁸ Perhaps unintentionally, he was

6. Claudio Guillén, "Pedro Salinas, múltiple," in *De leyendas y lecciones: Siglos XIX, XX y XXI* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 2007), 105–43.

7. Pedro Salinas, "El Defensor: Ensayos," in *Ensayos Completos: Obras Completas II*, ed. Enric Bou and Andrés Soria Olmedo (Madrid: Cátedra, 2007), 887.

8. Salinas, *Epistolario Completo*, 264.

anticipating his future life in exile, and the importance that letter writing would have as a survival tool, as life insurance, or as a return ticket to some enchanted islands within the realm of literature.

Salinas's contribution to literary criticism may be read under the light and principles of the New Criticism, with emphasis on the text itself, not its paraphrase into critical jargons. His idea of literature is somewhat atemporal, always searching for eternal values, the essence of human beings. When speculating about his activity as a professor or literary critic, Salinas would stress the fact that he always wanted to explain "great works" as examples of eternal human values that still reflect present day situations and tribulations. He did not perceive old texts as some sort of arcane papyrus that critics and scholars should ornament with sophisticated and intricate footnotes (in a Nabokovian *Pale Fire* way), but rather as a *live* text. Thus younger generations of readers could remain sensitive to old texts as "live" or "living" words. He hoped that readers could remain attracted to writing from all eras, visualizing in them aesthetic, historic, moral, and philological issues related to their own lives. On many occasions, Salinas scorned his colleagues who refused to betray their true love for literature, and who chose to hide behind obscure data and elucidations. He would defend the pedagogical method of establishing a dialogue with the text and making it understandable for his students. This attitude of pointed transparency can also be seen in his approach to creative writing: Salinas wanted his own writings to be readily understood, and strived to create a mirror effect in the reader's mind through personal situations and feelings. At the same time, the poet was consciously fostering an ambiguity (and confusion) between life and literature. We can detect a Salinian concept, "phases of reality," that he learned from classical Spanish literature and incorporated into his own writing, especially in certain poems (particularly those from *My Voice Because of You*), in the plays, and in the short stories.

Pedro Salinas thrived on observation and curiosity, and was always amazed at the wonders of the world he was living in. Ahead of his time while in Spain, he explored new ways of writing, new venues of literature. He was as much a critical observer of Madrid's literary milieu as an explorer of Europe and a "rediscoverer" of the Americas, where he found both happiness and refuge in difficult times. Salinas's writings reflect the wonder and fear of a man trapped between two worlds, two cultures, two languages, and two time periods. The preoccupations crystallized in his theater and prose, his poems and letters, capture the contradictory and complex hardships and demands of an uprooted generation of writers. He reacted fiercely against what he deemed the insane. He feared the A-Bomb and its implications for military and other dangerous and

oppressive applications. As a newcomer to a new world, the one being created at the onset of the Cold War, he denounced, from a humanistic old-world perspective, the shortcomings, defects, and contradictions of contemporary civilization. And still, while alert to the dehumanizing aspects of this new era he so well chronicled, the poet's voice would never cease to marvel at his new constellations of stars.

Enric Bou

Providence, Rhode Island