CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION: THE THEME OF FLEETINGNESS IN POEMS BY JUAN RAMÓN JIMÉNEZ AND PEDRO SALINAS

ANDREW P. DEBICKI
The University of Kansas

As has been noted on more than one occasion, the search for the essences of things—of individual experiences, of the beloved, of beauty—is one of the constants of Juan Ramón Jiménez' work. His ever-present dedication to the poetic quest can be seen as the result of this search, and of the desire to battle against meaninglessness and nothingness and to assert and preserve beauty.[1] On the face of it, this striving relates Juan Ramón's work to that of Pedro Salinas, who is constantly examining reality and love in an effort to define the essences and "trans-realities" that underlie them, and to preserve such essences in his verse.[2] Salinas can in fact be seen as one of the inheritors of the symbolic concept of poetry as a search for transcendence which dates back to Mallarmé and finds full expression in the work of Juan Ramón.[3] Such a view is useful in showing how Salinas and other poets of his generation continue one of the most important traditions of modern poetry.

In the works of both Salinas and Juan Ramón, this quest for essences does not always lead to positive resolutions. Many poems of each, in fact, deal with its failure, and with the impossibility of fully capturing and preserving beauty, reality, life. How these expressions of failure fit into the larger path of each poet's work has been and will continue to be examined; it need not concern us here. I would like to focus, however, on the ways in which several poems of both poets embody and convey this impossibility of seizing the essences of life. In doing so, I will be able to highlight some important differences between the expressive forms and the works of the two poets. Those differences will illustrate how, even in texts dealing with the impossibility of seizing essences in poetry, Juan Ramón remains committed to a logocentric tradition in which the poem's forms and words embody objectively its meaning; they will also show how Salinas, much to the contrary, writes poems whose meanings evolve with each

reading and in fact exemplify their theme of reality's fleetingness. Yet we will also see how the final experiences produced in the reader by these different works and approaches may be amazingly similar.

The impossibility of capturing beauty is the theme of the following well-known poem, taken from Juan Ramón Jiménez' *Piedra y cielo:*

Mariposa de luz,	Light moth, butterfly,
la belleza se va cuando yo llego	beauty escapes when I approach
a su rosa.	its rose.
Corro, ciego, tras ella . . .	I run, half blind, in pursuit . . .
La medio cojo aquí y allá . . .	I half seize it here and there . . .
¡Sólo queda en mi mano	It only leaves in my hand
la forma de su huída![4]	the form of its escape!

On the most obvious level, the poem operates symbolically: the "mariposa de luz" is explicitly identified as the equivalent of beauty, and its evasiveness therefore comes to stand for beauty's fleetingness. The speaker's efforts to capture it conjure up the poet's frustrating attempts to seize beauty, and only result in his being able to apprehend the patterns of its escape and elusiveness.

Much of the poem's effectiveness, however, depends on the way in which it embodies a very specific event through words which at the same time carry forward its symbolic meaning. "Mariposa de luz," refers, literally, to a specific kind of insect, a light moth, and in this sense pins down the immediate reality described; but "mariposa" and "luz" are also words frequently associated with beauty. Similarly, the rose in line 3 both specifies the setting and introduces the most traditional symbol of beauty in Western literature. (Had the poem used "flor" instead of "rosa," it would have been both less visual and less symbolically explicit.) By calling himself "ciego," the protagonist both evokes the disorientation and the inability to see caused by chasing an evasive butterfly or moth, and hints at the poet's frustrating blindness in his search for beauty. The "forma de su huída" refers on the one hand to the sensation that one can actually *see* the path of a rapidly fleeing object, and on the other to the evidence of beauty's

escape that one can discern in many works of poetry. Juan Ramón's remarkable ability to make the same words and details support both the literal and the symbolic level of the poem keeps it from becoming either too abstract or too immersed in the particular scene, and produces a combination of immediacy and significance that may well be the mark of the successful symbolic text.

We might note, moreover, that the way in which these elements point in two directions produces no tension or conflict within the text. The rose's specificity in no way affects or diminishes its symbolic value; nor does the literal meaning of "mariposa de luz" diminish the symbolic overtones of "luz." The work produces the impression of a harmonious whole, in which both levels have been perfectly integrated. Even the way in which the speaker calls attention to his actions ("llego," "corro") integrates perfectly his role as protagonist with his symbolic quest as poet in search for beauty.

But if there is no conflict within the text, one may arise within the reader as he thinks about it. The poem's overt meaning is that beauty is evasive, that it cannot be seized fully in the poem. Yet this negative thesis is presented in a text so harmoniously put together that it could serve as a prototype for the perfect embodiment of a meaning through language and symbol. In that sense, the poem's very perfection undercuts its stated message (and the message, in turn, calls into question its perfection). In his efforts to objectify fully his theme, Juan Ramón may have produced a work which is totally cohesive and tension-free, but which nevertheless invites us to "deconstruct" it.[5]

Something similar happens when we read this other poem from *Piedra y cielo:*

Mis piernas cojen, recias, la desnudez magnífica— redonda, fresca, suave— de la yegua parada de la vida.	My strong legs seize the magnificent nakedness— round, fresh, soft— of the stopped mare of life.
—¡Ya la he clavado bajo mí! ¡Ya me está dando lo que yo anhelaba!—	—I have already nailed her beneath me! She is giving me what I desired!—

Mas de pronto, mis ojos se me vuelven tristes,	But suddenly, my eyes turn sad
de su hermosura, de su trono mío,	from her beauty, from her throne of mine,
a la yeguada vaga que huye . . .	to the vague group of escaping horses . . .
	(*Libros de poesía,* p. 728)

Again, the symbolism is quite clear. The mare is explicitly identified as life, and the speaker's ability to keep it motionless and to ride it stands for his feeling of success in stopping and controlling life, in obtaining fulfillment. The escaping horses in the last stanza evoke those aspects of life which are evading him, and point to his awareness that he had not, after all, seized all the life that was possible. The poem's structure effectively underlines its meaning. By first showing the speaker's success, climaxed in the exclamations of the second stanza, it immerses the reader in his illusion of triumph; by then portraying his sense of loss at the end, it undercuts this illusion and dramatically makes us feel the impossibility of really stopping and controlling one's life.

This poem does include a dimension that was not present in "Mariposa de luz. . . ." Although its literal level is the riding of a mare by the protagonist, it at least indirectly refers to the sexual possession of a woman. The references to "magnificent nakedness" seem more in keeping with a woman than a horse; the adjectives "round," "fresh," and "soft" conjure up sensations which again suggest an erotic interest. The speaker's triumphant exclamations in stanza two, his use of the word "clavado," and his sense of joy at obtaining his desires all hint at the climax of a sexual act. Taking all this into account, we might say that in addition to its explicit symbolic pattern (mare=life), the poem contains an implicit metaphorical one, in which the riding of the mare is juxtaposed and related to the sexual possession of a woman.

This metaphorical scheme, however, supports rather than impedes the poem's basic symbolism. The impression of triumph generated by a sexual climax embodies very well the speaker's joy at controlling life and stopping time; the melancholic realization that such an achievement is not total or everlasting corresponds to his sense of incompleteness in so doing. The allusion to sexual conquest may in fact justify the symbolism better than the image of riding a mare. The intensity of the sexual act, its greater significance, and the

tendency to see it as something transcendent and time-defying all suggest that the literal level of the poem refers to something more important than the mere riding of a horse, and in this sense underline the importance of the symbolic level, the feeling of having stopped and controlled life. We might say that the poem constructs a metaphor for its basic anecdote, and uses this metaphor to support and further justify the symbolic level which it ascribes to this anecdote.

Despite this complexity, the poem is as unified as the one previously studied. None of the sensorial details—whether they refer to the riding of a horse or to the possession of a woman—in any way contradict the symbolic pattern, or even draw us away from it. The speaker has no traits that would distract us from his role as illusory possessor of mare, woman, and life. The tightness of the work's structure helps its literal and symbolic levels cohere.[6]

Yet again the reader may have some doubts as to the poem's ultimate effect. The very tightness of the link established between riding a horse, possessing a woman, and seizing life inspires some doubt. It seems terribly materialistic and sexist to argue that the sexual act is not that different from riding a horse! Can the complex process of trying and failing to seize life be portrayed by such exact symbolism? Admittedly, those questions force us to depart from the text, and could be judged illegitimate in an objective close reading. But they at least suggest that the poem's very exactitude and sparseness engender doubt. In a somewhat different way than "Mariposa de luz . . . ," this poem also leaves us tempted to "deconstruct" its meaning and call into question its message.

The theme of the fleetingness of things is handled in a very different fashion in this poem from Pedro Salinas' *Presagios:*

Arena: hoy dormida en la playa	Sand: sleeping on the beach today
y mañana cobijada	and tomorrow caressed
en los senos del mar:	in the bosom of the sea:
hoy del sol y mañana del agua.	the sun's today, water's prize tomorrow.
A la mano que te oprime	Softly you yield
la cedes blanda	to the hand that presses you
y te vas con el primer viento	and go away with the first
galán que pasa.	courting wind that appears.

Arena pura y casquivana,	Pure and fickle sand,
novia versátil y clara, te quise por mía	changing and clear beloved, I wanted you for my own,
y te estreché contra el pecho y el alma.	and held you against my chest and soul.
Pero con olas y brisas y soles te fuiste	But with waves and wind and sun you went off,
y me quedé sin amada,	and I remained without a beloved,
con la frente dada al viento que me la robaba,	with my face turned to the wind which robbed her,
y la vista al mar lejano donde ella tenía	and my eyes to the far-off sea in which she had
verdes amores en verde posada.[7]	green loves in a green shelter.

Unlike the Juan Ramón poems I have examined, this one is built on an unusual personification that turns into a metaphor, surprising the reader and leading him far beyond the work's anecdote. In the first half the physical elusiveness of sand (it slips through one's hand, it flies with the wind, it moves from shore to sea) is presented in such a way as to evoke a coquettish woman, yielding to her lover and then escaping from him, running off with a wind personified as "galán," moving from one person to another. Watching these images, the reader gradually forgets that the poem is literally about sand and is taken up by the unusual correspondences and by the figure of a coquette which they evoke. When in the last half of the poem the speaker addresses the sand and laments her escape, the reader is fully drawn into the view of this sand as fickle woman and of the speaker as abandoned lover.

Looking at the poem as a whole, we could say that the unusual metaphor served to take us beyond both of the elements being compared and led us to the trait they have in common, their elusiveness. In the last analysis, the comparison has not shed much light on either sand or woman, nor has it clearly defined the speaker's real life experience. But it has made us feel the elusiveness of it, and the effect it has had on the speaker's emotions. In that sense, we might say that this poem, like the ones by Juan Ramón Jiménez, uses a natural image to lead us to a wider theme, embodying a general vision of fleetingness.[8]

Yet this reading is not totally convincing. For one thing, it takes the

poem and its speaker more seriously than they merit. If the poem is to be a presentation of elusiveness in the world, then the correspondence between girl and sand must be seen as a discovery of their common fleetingness by an insightful speaker. To read that way, we must ignore the fantastic nature of the comparisons, the whimsical attitude to reality that they suggest, and certain touches of parody. The speaker who laments his loss as if he were a traditional Romantic ("pero con olas y brisas y soles te fuiste/ y me quedé sin amada"), is after all, only lamenting the loss of *sand*! The last lines, with their evocation of the beloved in an archetypal kingdom of the sea, also ring a bit hollow if we keep this fact in mind.

To avoid these objections, we might focus on the poem's speaker as an individual and perhaps not trustworthy character. The whole text would be this speaker's unsuccessful attempt to develop the personification of sand as woman and thus convey his sense of the elusiveness of the surrounding world. Through the comparisons he has developed, the speaker unites sand and woman in our perceptions, and tries to lead us to his theme; his lament at the end is supposed to gain our assent and our compassion. But he tries too hard; he has to paint himself as too much of a Romantic, and he loses our assent when we realize that his romantic declarations are, after all, addressed to sand. ("Te estreché contra el pecho y el alma" become ludicrously parodic of love declarations when this is kept in mind.) His traditional posture of cruelly neglected lover at the end of the poem likewise seems ill-fitting—his beloved is in harmony with nature, where she belongs (and she was nothing but sand in any event). Reading this way, we see the speaker as a character in Salinas' poem—a poet who tries to convey seriously the theme of fleetingness, but fails in his efforts. The poem's meaning, then, is not so much the theme of fleetingness in itself, but the failure to embody this theme on the part of this speaker. The poet Salinas, in contrast to the poet-speaker, dramatically communicates to us the failure of the latter's attempt to capture a universal meaning through his unusual image.

This reading too may inspire some doubt. It requires a certain ingenuity on the reader's part to develop, and takes us beyond ideas which we can confirm in the text. The latter, for example, does not furnish any overt judgment of the speaker as unreliable; it does not offer us anything through which to define the attitude of an implied author as opposed to the one taken by the speaker. (To separate the two, we have to judge the speaker ourselves and posit an implied author, using our own attitudes as a basis.) Furthermore, the

metapoetic dimension that this reading gives the poem is more implicit than explicit. Nevertheless, this second reading does account better than the first for the metaphor, the theme, and the tone and attitude of the speaker.

Confronted by these two interpretations, we might back off from both of them and try a third. Leaving aside the theme of loss, we might focus more exclusively on the comparison of sand to girl, and see the poem as no more than a very playful "experiment," a demonstration of the extent to which a metaphor can be carried. The unusual correspondence certainly shows the power of poetic imagination, as well as the poet's unique ability to leave aside the world of fact and find patterns that are irrelevant to practical concerns, but highly creative and amusing in their own right. If sand can be a coquettish girl, what other delightful correspondences can we find around us? And isn't the process of making such metaphors and whimsically playing with them more interesting than the daily activities in which we normally indulge? (We could also suggest that in this poem the imaginative metaphor has so involved the speaker-poet that he ends up forgetting he is only talking about sand.) This interpretation, nonetheless, does not account for the whole theme of fleetingness that underlies the poem and its metaphor and seems something like a partial version of our second reading.

Which of the alternatives seem best? Perhaps that is the wrong question. They are all plausible, and they all highlight important dimensions of the text. If we abandon our logocentric concern with finding *but one* meaning for the work, we could accept them all as possible experiences which the reader may derive from it. Which of them might have been on Salinas' mind? We will never know, nor does it perhaps matter. Whatever the initial meaning, the poem has in it the possibilities of evolving in several directions, and these possibilities will become apparent to diverse readers in accord with the premises which they will bring to it and the questions they will ask.

In those terms, we might see the comparison of sand to girl functioning like the word "Ariachne" in *Troilus and Cressida,* as interpreted by J. Hillis Miller. It is an element that brings together several disparate meanings, hence initiating a confrontation between them and a whole process of readings and re-readings.[9] Unlike Juan Ramón, who set up monological symbols and encased his theme in them, Pedro Salinas has constructed a dialogical and "open" metaphor, through which he has evoked diverse interpretations. The poem's ultimate meaning is not to be found in any one of these nor in

their resolution, but rather in all of them together placed in dialogical conflict with each other.[10]

Any conclusions about Juan Ramón or Salinas based on the study of three poems are necessarily suspect. Nevertheless, the contrast we have seen between their works does offer broader insights, and supports a generalization that can also be obtained from a wider reading of their work. Juan Ramón, imbued as he was with the striving for perfection in poetry, embodied his vision of the theme of fleetingness in perfectly crafted, finished works—although in doing so he ran the risk of inviting the reader to take his construct apart. Salinas, much more skeptical about easy resolutions, opted for a form of expression which contains within itself the seeds of various readings which the reader can pick up and follow. The whimsical tone, the ambiguous metaphor, and the enigmatic meanings of "Arena: hoy dormida en la playa . . ." suggest that we might see his work less in the light of symbolist tenets and of "pure poetry" and might start investigating more thoroughly its correspondences to other poetic and conceptual traditions, its availability to recent metapoetic and "deconstructive" criticism, and its relationship to the works of younger writers like the "poetas novísimos" in Spain. This might also invite us to re-examine the "Generation of 1927" and seek to identify those traits which already separate some of its members from the symbolist tradition—just as we have so far accented the ones that unite them with it.

NOTES

1. See for example the introduction to Paul R. Olson, *Circle of Paradox* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1967) and Antonio Sánchez Barbudo, *La segunda época de Juan Ramón Jiménez* (Madrid, Gredos, 1962), especially pp. 15–18, 43–45, and 74–77. Olson stresses Juan Ramón's drive to save permanent beauty from the effects of time.

2. Salinas' search for such a "trans-reality" has been best defined by Concha Zardoya in "La 'otra' realidad de Pedro Salinas," included in *Pedro Salinas*, ed. A. Debicki (Madrid, Taurus, 1976), pp. 63–84.

3. See my "La generación de 1924–1925 y la tradición simbolista," *Explicación de Textos Literarios*, 8 (1979–80), 21–31.

4. I take the poem's text from Juan Ramón Jiménez, *Libros de poesía,* 2nd. ed. (Madrid, Aguilar, 1959), p. 777. All three translations are my own. "Mariposa de luz" is literally translatable as "light moth." This, however, eliminates the connotations of beauty in "mariposa" (butterfly).

5. For an example of one kind of deconstructive criticism, see J. Hillis Miller, "Ariachne's Broken Woof," *Georgia Review,* 31 (1977), 44–60; a more theoretical discussion of the approach appears in Miller's "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II," *Georgia Review,* 30 (1976), 330–348. See also note 10 below.

6. It might be well to keep in mind that Juan Ramón's *Piedra y cielo* (1918), from which both of his poems here studied are taken, is an excellent example of the tight, symbolic poetry of the 1917–1923 period of his work. See for example Michael R. Predmore, *La poesía hermética de Juan Ramón Jiménez* (Madrid, Gredos, 1973), pp. 201–222. A similar use of exact forms to capture the theme of fleetingness can, however, be found also in poems from earlier books (an example: the well-known "Retorno fugaz" from *Sonetos espirituales*).

7. I take the text from Salinas, *Poesías completas,* ed. J. Marichal (Madrid, Aguilar, 1955), p. 25.

8. I offered this interpretation in my "La generación de 1924–1925 y la tradición simbolista," pp. 27–28, and used the poem to illustrate a connection between Salinas and the symbolist tradition. The analysis I am now presenting is in some ways a "deconstruction" of that earlier one.

9. "Ariachne's Broken Woof," pp. 46–49. On p. 52, Miller summarizes his view of Troilus' speech: "If Troilus' speech is taken as a model of narrative discourse, it demonstrates the possibility of a story which is simultaneously two different incompatible stories. These can never be reduced to one by any rule of unity." Something similar could be said about the basic metaphor of Salinas' poem.

10. If we are to take a strictly "deconstructive" approach to all these poems, we would have to accept the notion that all of them, like any other writing, undermine themselves. Jacques Derrida's notion is that every sign holds within it the traces of other signs, or open spaces that point to opposite and even contradictory meanings; in this sense it is inevitably and perennially "under erasure." (See Derrida's *Of Grammatology,* tr. Gayatri C. Spivak [Baltimore, 1974], pp. 22–24.) I would nonetheless argue that Salinas' poem undermines itself in a much more evident (and much more inevitable) fashion than the Juan Ramón Jiménez poems here studied.