

# WALLACE STEVENS AND ANTONIO COLINAS: POETIC RECREATION OF A PICTORIAL IMAGE AND BOTTICELLI'S *THE BIRTH OF VENUS*

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**Abstract:** Both Wallace Stevens and Antonio Colinas wrote poems that had their origin in Sandro Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus*. Despite the apparent cultural distance between both poets, it is my view that they shared some common ground in the poems "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" and "Simonetta Vespucci". This article analyzes their poetics on imagination first. I will also discuss their poetics and then read the poems against Botticelli's painting. Colinas is not interested, as Stevens was, in the creation of new poetics different from European standards. Stevens is basically interested in exploring new ways of representation much in the way Cézanne or Picasso did so that his poems could support the new American art. Colinas' main concern is the revitalized use of the classical tradition at the end of the last century. The analyses of both their essays and their poems show the distance there is between the beginning and the end of the 20th in literature.

**Key words:** Wallace Stevens / Antonio Colinas / Sandro Botticelli / Birth of Venus / ekphrasis.

**Resumen:** Wallace Stevens y Antonio Colinas escribieron sendos poemas cuyo origen está en el *El nacimiento de Venus* de Sandro Botticelli. A pesar de la distancia cultural y temporal que hay entre ambos, los dos poetas compartían algunos puntos estéticos, como demuestran los poemas "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" y "Simonetta Vespucci". El artículo analiza las respectivas poéticas sobre la imaginación en primer lugar pues esto ayudará a esclarecer las ideas que Stevens y Colinas tenían de las relaciones entre poesía y pintura. A continuación analiza el poema comparándolo con el cuadro de Botticelli. A Colinas no le interesa, al contrario que a Stevens, la creación de una poética moderna que se distinga de la europea. A Stevens le interesa principalmente la exploración de nuevos modos de representación en la línea que avanzaron Cézanne o Picasso en la pintura, con el propósito de hallar un modo de expresión americano. Por el contrario, Colinas se preocupa por revitalizar la tradición clásica en las postrimerías del siglo XX. El análisis de los ensayos y los poemas muestra la distancia que media entre el inicio y el final del siglo XX en literatura.

**Palabras clave:** Wallace Stevens / Antonio Colinas / Sandro Botticelli / El nacimiento de Venus / ékfrasis.

Images and words, i.e., painting and poetry have been close companions throughout history, though in some periods the links have been stronger.<sup>2</sup> The eighteenth, the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, for example, witnessed a surprising enthusiasm on the part of poets for the use of ekphrastic devices that Romanticism, on the contrary, underestimated. Thus, twentieth century poetry experiences a rebirth of interest in the relations between poetry and the visual arts, namely, painting, photography and

cinema. The influence of artistic movements such as Cubism, Fauvism, Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, or even nineteenth-century Impressionism account for the varied interests of the poets Jean Cocteau, Octavio Paz, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, John Ashbery, José Ángel Valente, Antonio Colinas, or José Miguel Ullán, to name only a few, during their poetic careers. It should not come as a surprise then that both their poems and essays deal with pictorial issues in the widest sense.

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In general terms, painting has not been a mere transitory interest for these poets. Painting has been a life-long devotion that surfaces in specific poems but also runs deep as a core element of their poetics. The view that arts form a single unit must be brought into any discussion of the relation between poetry and painting (Steiner 1982: 1-18; Markiewicz 2000: 51-86), but the debate must go beyond that point since poetry and painting use contrasting methods and techniques and, consequently, are set apart for their differing artistic starting points. Although they may achieve the same goals, their separate paths and points of arrival are also different (Mitchell 1994: 83-107; Varga 1989: 31-53).

I would like to examine two poems, written by Wallace Stevens and Antonio Colinas respectively, that both have their origin in Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus". I am referring to "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" and "Simonetta Vespucci". My aim is to indicate and analyse how the same painting has provided the same source for two poets who superficially seem very different, and how both poets have confronted the same painting and how they have used painting for their own purposes. I am not interested in a comparative analysis of both poets' poetics, rather I want to point out how each poet viewed the painting according to their own poetics.

### 1. The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage

Wallace Stevens wrote "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" early in his career. It was part of one of the poems in *Pecksniffiana*.<sup>3</sup> As Beverly Maeder asserts, the poem seduces "us through the vaguely nostalgic imagery of [its] mythological seascapes and the depth of [its] associations with painting and literature alike" (Maeder 2009: np). For Buehlens and Eeckhout, the poem deals with the possibilities of creating a distinctive American art as opposed to European forms (Buehlens and Eeckhout 2010: np). The poems that form the "Pecksniffiana" selection were the result of such a concern. If "Anecdote of the Jar" sets out an alternative to British Romantic aesthetic ideals, "The Paltry Nude..." proposes a new reading of Botticelli's famous painting in which Renaissance European aesthetic values are replaced by American imagination giving voice to Modernist literary strategies that reinforce a

homegrown poetics, as I expect to demonstrate. Bloom has written extensively on the importance of Ralph W. Emerson and Walt Whitman on Stevens' poetics and how they helped Stevens to shape his poetics of Americanness (Bloom 1977: 10).

Stevens wrote at length on the relations between poetry and painting and as well as on the subject of imagination. His essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" published in *The Necessary Angel* in 1951 –though originally delivered as a lecture at Museum of Modern Art in January that year– remains his main statement on the issue. Though written much later than "The Paltry Nude...", and consequently differing greatly from Stevens' early opinions on poetry or painting, it is my view that a discussion of some issues that arise in this and in other essays by Stevens may help to explain the poem.

Stevens discusses imagination in "Imagination as Value" and defines it as "the power of the mind over the possibilities of things" (Stevens 1997: 726). The power that imagination can exert over things means, to a certain extent, that imagination can transform reality or even create it. Stevens seems to imply that reality, at least when opposed to imagination, lacks stability. It can occasionally be transformed through the power of imagination. More importantly, it is created by the individual's mind. As Stevens asserts: "We live in the mind" (Stevens 1997: 728). Images of the world differ as we turn from one individual to another. The imagination creates fictions that are taken as images of the world in part because imagination functions as a substitute for science and in part also because it is mediated by the historical and local context in which the individual is living. As Pearce points out: "the Imagination may be defined as at once the use which the Reason makes of the material world and the use which the material world makes of the Reason" (Pearce 1965: 142), or as Miller indicates: "all his work is an attempt to explore the endless variable perspectives from which reality can be viewed by the imagination" (Miller 1965: 225). As Ragg points out: "The 'work' becomes, then, a necessary fiction. [Stevens] sees a fictive ideal as directly catalyzing imaginative creation" (Ragg 2010: 89). The idea of a supreme fiction that would be prevalent in Stevens' poetry was already present in "The Paltry Nude..." Stevens realized that the

<sup>3</sup> Pecksniffiana refers to a group of poems sent to Harriet Monroe, then editor of *Poetry* in 1919 and was later published in *Harmonium* (1923). See Stevens 1966: 214.

re-presentation of Botticelli's painting could offer some glimpses of a worldview that was new. As imagination is mediated by time and place (both of which move beyond the individual), a change of one of the factors implies a change in imagination. "The Paltry Nude..." was part of "Pecksniffiana", and narrated an anecdote—as most poems of the group did—but it was an anecdote that reflected the modernist imagination to which Stevens was committed to by then. He shared the same concerns as his contemporaries regarding Modernist American poetry (Longenbach 2007: 79). Such poets ascribed the exact depiction of objects in verses using the exact words and non-hampered metre as well as the dismissal of the abstract and the introduction of the concrete (Gray 1990: 88-89).

Stevens' poetry might also present an important strand of romanticism as Stevens was concerned with Coleridgean idealism, even though, as Ragg indicates: "Stevens' modernizing of Coleridgean idealism does occur in the late 1930s" (Ragg 2010: 84). However, a few pages after, he admits that "Coleridgean idealism links imagination and world intimately" (Ragg 2010: 87). Stevens reformulates this idea in "Imagination as Value", when he says: "Yet the imagination changes as the mind changes" (Stevens 1997: 736). The poem is an act of the mind, as Stevens himself declared in "Modern Poetry": "The poem of the act of mind" (Stevens 1997: 219). In a similar fashion, reality is also a construct of the mind despite its hazardous theoretical position that puts reality on the verge of an idealist entrapment. For Stevens, as Miller analyses, reality and poetry are not different parts of the same substance. Words "are part of the thing, tangled inextricably with the event they describe" (Miller 1965: 155).

Stevens continues his discussion on imagination and reality in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting". In the second section of his essay, Stevens asserts that "the poet does his job by virtue of an effort of the mind", and some sentences earlier, claims that the typical function of the imagination is to make "use of the familiar to produce the unfamiliar" (Stevens 1977: 744). The imagination is a constructive force that uses experience as a material for creation. It is not the mere organizing ability or the repetitive or distributive skill of the mind but the active faculty of the mind that creates the work of art. Again, we can see the Coleridgean strain in Stevens' ideas on imagination. However, we must go beyond an acknowledgement of this influence and investigate

the implications of the imagination as a constructive force for Stevens' poetics. As the imagination sets in motion an effort of the mind, inspiration should not be considered as the primary force in the creative process. There is a denial of the vulgar idea of the creative process as the outcome of the poet's genius. At the same time, the effort that makes imagination a creative faculty helps art to be a substitute for faith in times of disbelief. This was an idea that he might have discovered in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature", even if it is veiled and not explicitly stated (Richardson 1999: 103). Imagination is part of Emerson's self and replaces religious faith. After Emerson suffered his crisis of belief and resigned from the ministry, he did not become an atheist or an agnostic. He transformed his religious faith into an absolute belief in the self. This self would then communicate with God, or the over-Soul, by means of nature. Eventually this implies that the work of fiction may sustain itself as a substitute for religion, as Stevens wrote in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman", a poem published in *Harmonium* and written at about the same time as "The Paltry Nude...". The poem reads: "Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame. / Take the moral law and make a nave of it/ And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus, / The conscience is converted into palms" (Stevens 1997: 47). The secularization of the religious realm frees literary imagination to become a substitute for religious faith and to function as sustenance in a world in which the single Truth has given way to diverse individual truths. Imagination and its product, culture, replace faith.

Important as this may be, I would like to reorient the discussion to consider imagination as a faculty that defamiliarizes the known world. In this respect, at the end of the essay Stevens discusses decreation, a term that he takes from Simone Weil—who was religious though not conventionally so. "Decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated", writes Stevens and adds later, as if to explain the sense: "Modern reality is a reality of decreation in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portent of our own powers" (Stevens 1997: 750). The process of defamiliarization is based on the faculty of imagination and involves a process of transforming the world as we know it into a world that is unfamiliar. Imagination has helped to create a new reality he duly observes when writing about Cézanne (Stevens 1997: 750). Poets and painters have worked together many times to create this new reality. Sometimes they have collaborated in

the same work, elsewhere they have shared the same aesthetic tenets. By rewriting "The Birth of Venus", Stevens is not only creating a new version of the painting, he is breaking with familiar conventions of representation. As Altieri says of Duchamp, "his abstract paintings locate the abstracting force in the capacity of the painterly agency to inhabit modes of intensity that lead beyond anything the empirical understanding can provide" (Altieri 1989: 16-17). The emphasis does not lie on abstraction but on the modes of intensity. Altieri's discussion concludes that some poems, such as "The Paltry Nude..." reveal Stevens' urge to recreate established artistic forms and modes differently. Other poems such as "The Man with the Blue Guitar", and its reference to Picasso, or "Prelude to Objects" by Cézanne point to Stevens' interest in paintings and their alternative recreation (Ragg 2010: 70-72; 114-117).

Stevens' view of imagination as a creative force and a means to decreate the world was at the basis of his attempt to write "The Paltry Nude..." As the origin could be found in Emerson's theory of the imagination, Stevens' would be American as well. Nonetheless, Stevens' interest in art kept him in touch with the European *avant-garde*, from which he would take some tenets, as I will argue now. The anxiety between an art that is American as opposed to a European art lies at the center of Stevens' poems. The concern he showed in his poetics with artistic identity is reflected in many of his poems including "The Paltry Nude..."

"The Paltry Nude..." illuminates some interesting questions on Stevens regarding Transatlanticism or Americanness. As Ragg rightfully points out, Stevens' poetics is transatlantic because of the literary and the other artistic influences present (Ragg 2008: 133). Filreis also argues about the role French paintings have played in Steven's poetry (Filreis 1992: np). On the other hand, Stevens was well aware that it was absolutely necessary to create an American art. The Armory Show convinced him of this necessity, and his meeting Duchamp in 1915 helped him realize the possibility of the project (Haglund 2008: 121-132).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Buehlens and Eeckhout have pointed to the poetics that "The Paltry Nude..." develops as an alternative to Botticelli's, i.e., as opposed to canonical European painting. Like other poems from *Harmonium*, such as "Anecdote of the Jar",

for example, "The Paltry Nude..." attempts to create an American setting that may be the New World equivalent of a European scene (Buehlens and Eeckhout 2010: np).

"The Paltry Nude..." is a poem of five stanzas composed of five verses each. As I have already indicated it was written at a very early stage in Stevens' career, and was sent, together with other poems, for publication to *Poetry* in 1919. Though it was published in his first book of poems, *Harmonium*, Stevens felt the anxiety of publishing them and preferred them to remain unpublished (Ragg 2010: 32). It is also interesting to note that his early poems were written as anecdotes as the title of some of them show: "Anecdote of the Jar", "Earthy Anecdote", "Anecdote of Canna". Anecdotes suited small literary magazines, as Ragg pointed out (Ragg 2010: 31-32). "The Paltry Nude..." can be read also as a short, amusing account of something that has happened. This reading would demystify the cultural background behind Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus".

The poem takes as its referent Botticelli's painting, and narrates her birth freely. Nonetheless, "The Paltry Nude..." is not a narrative poem in the same way that Botticelli's painting is. Stevens was aware of the importance of the myth of Venus in Western humanistic tradition and chose not to make it a straightforward reference to his poem. As it is well known, when the Titan Cronus severed his father's (Uranus) genitals and flung them into the sea, the blood and semen caused foam that gathered and voyaged across to the island of Cyprus. There Aphrodite rose out of the sea from the foam. She is usually depicted with her son Cupid and the Horae, who were in charge of her instruction. The whole painting is full of symbols from a long established iconological tradition. The shell in which she is approaching the land is a symbol of love. "The Birth of Venus" was a theme that inspired poets, sculptors and painters throughout the centuries as Aby Warburg investigated (Warburg 2005: 73-121). However, what I am interested in highlighting is the essential narrative nature of the painting that was common in the Renaissance. Paintings were expected to tell a story. "Art for art's sake" did not appear as art's main aim till the end of the nineteenth century. In the Renaissance, paintings were meant to have a didactic function besides

<sup>4</sup> The name refers to the 1913 *International Exhibition of Modern Art*. The exhibition ran in New York City's 69th Regiment Armory, on Lexington Avenue between 25th and 26th Streets, from February 17 until March 15. It introduced American painters and poets to modern art and helped to get them rid of realism.

showing the economic and political power of the patron. Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" illustrated a classical myth as well as serving as a portrait for Simonetta Vespucci, as Warburg remarked (Warburg 2005: 107-110).

What surprises us at first sight in Stevens' poem is the title. It is stripped of the beauty and elegance present in Botticelli's. As a matter of fact, the title of the poem is the opposite of the scene represented in the painting. The adjective paltry suggests the insubstantiality of the nude and, consequently, of the whole poem. The second surprising aspect is the blend of Botticelli's two famous paintings, "The Birth of Venus" and "Spring" which Stevens combined in his title, although spring is implicitly present in "The Birth of Venus" as this is the season when the Earth returns to life every year. I am not stating that there is any kind of reference, either implicit or explicit, to Ceres or to any myth that describes a descent to the underworld and subsequent return to the surface. Botticelli's painting depicts a positive and lively scene from which the dark side of life is absent.

The poem begins with two sentences which start with an adversative conjunction: "But not on a shell.../ But on the first-found..." (Stevens 1997: 4). The poem starts in opposition to something that comes before but is not present in it. The reader must bear in mind Botticelli's painting, which serves as a model, albeit a negative model, for the poem. Stevens never fully reveals the source for his poem although he does offer some hints, namely the sea and the shell. In the second stanza there is another element that opposes the model: the lady who sails does not offer the smiling and positive image that the reader can find in Botticelli. On the contrary, she is not at ease in the scene. In "The Birth of Venus", Venus approaches the shore whereas in Stevens' poem the lady –supposedly Venus– is eager to depart at sea. She moves from the shore as if she has stopped being an earthly presence and wishes to disappear from the scene, i.e., from the painting or from the poem.

The last two stanzas are of great interest as well. Again we read an adjective, *meagre*, that degrades the scene. Insubstantiality appears again. The whole *play*, as Stevens calls it, is of no importance. Moreover, the noun *play* adds a polyvalent sense to the poem. It may be either a dramatic work or a type of game. The action depicted in the poem can be seen as either tragedy or entertainment, and is compared to another similar scene in the poem but "Of a later day" (Stevens 1997: 5). This is not the magnificent classical picto-

rial scene presented in Botticelli's painting. It is a smaller and less important scene created in twentieth century America. The depiction of nature in the poem is reduced to its most essential elements: the sea and the wind. There is little more in the painting, however, since Stevens simply mentions the constituents, the idea the reader gets from the text does not convey the finery of Botticelli's painting. Most important is the adjective of the last line, "irretrievable". This is suggested to affect "the goldener nude/ Of a later day" (Stevens 1997: 5). In Stevens, however, the nude's nature is not irreversible. If the "goldener nude" cannot be made to disappear, Stevens does not stand on such firm ground. Its nature is more unstable. As easily as it has come to existence, it can cease to exist. Stevens poses the problem of the nature of American art in this way.

It is quite interesting to read what Stevens says about the poet in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

Suppose we try, now, to construct the figure of a poet, a possible poet. He cannot be a charioteer traversing vacant space, however ethereal. He must have lived all of the last two thousand years, and longer, and he must have instructed himself, as best as he could, as he went along (Stevens 1997: 656).

The poet is the opposite figure of "The Paltry Nude" which seems to be sailing in the midst of nothing. Stevens' poet, on the contrary, needs history to exist as such. In fact, what he actually requires is the literary and cultural background against (or in) which he writes. The problem arises when we think of American poetry. Stevens' feeling was that there was hardly a large cultural background that could sustain poetry or any other art when he started writing (Buehlens and Eeckhout 2010: np). Although political independence had been achieved two centuries earlier, American artists were still anxious about American art. If Stevens felt that American art was not yet on firm ground making it irrevocable when writing *Harmonium*, when he published his essay in 1942 he was still concerned with the issue, although now he would be looking backwards to see how it had evolved through the years and how it would work with abstraction. In the first decade of the twentieth century Stevens dealt with alternative representations of canonical art, while in the 1940s he would be concerned with an art that was modern and American at the same time. This could not have been possible if he had not already written "The Paltry Nude..." or "Anecdote of the Jar". It must be also noted that,

in contrast to other poems such as, "Anecdote of the Jar," in which the setting is explicitly declared, there is not the slightest hint of the location in "The Paltry Nude..." It is the lack of all references to any place that de-Europeanizes the poem though it still does not achieve a hint of American poetry.

Stevens' poetics was subtly at play when he wrote "The Paltry Nude..." To begin with he does not write the poem in traditional verse, although he would write in other occasions. Then he would introduce the concrete in the poem. Describing an already existing object in an already known way to avoid abstraction in poetry, and consequently, make the poem coincidental with the need for representing concrete objects and concrete situations that was at stake in the first decades of the twentieth century with Imagism.<sup>5</sup> More important is Stevens' concept of imagination as he wrote on it in his essays. Imagination is a creative force that changes as the mind changes. At the same time it is a force that may defamiliarize reality. Stevens is making use of imagination as a constructive and defamiliarizing force when he recreates Botticelli's painting "The Birth of Venus". Although he offers a narrative that may resemble slightly Botticelli's, there is little doubt that he is attempting to create the American version of the painting as Bloom hints (Bloom 1977: 26). Stevens accomplishes such recreation by offering a degraded version of the myth, which includes a title that does not mention the myth, a different setting and a main character whose concerns are radically different to those that may be perceived in Botticelli's painting.

## 2. Simonetta Vespucci

Antonio Colinas published "Simonetta Vespucci", a poem of twenty-one verses, as the first poem in his collection *Sepulcro en Tarquinia* (Sepulcher in Tarquinia) in 1975. This work has been rightly labeled as his first fully mature book of poems (Llamazares 1997: 106). However, it was his fifth book of poems which showed all the features that characterized poetic culturalism in Spanish poetry in the 1970s (Prieto de Paula 1996: 173-221). In Spain in the 1970s, allusions to the Renaissance or to Romanticism, which in many cases contain decadent cultural references, endow the poems with a secondary symbolical meaning. The vogue was for

verse written on literary culture rather than for poetry based on contemporary secular life. Colinas' references are Latin as in "Castra Petavonium;" "Bucólica" (Bucolic); artistic as in "Simonetta Vespucci" and "Homenaje a Poussin" (Homage to Poussin); literary as in "Encuentro con Ezra Pound" (Encounter with Ezra Pound) or "Noviembre en Inglaterra" (November in England) to name only a few. Cultural components in Colinas' early poetry are a referent or a means to reach the ultimate truth. They are a pathway to knowledge and not a mere ornament (Puerto 1997: 57).

Colinas' poem has, as its referent, Botticelli's portrait of the homonymous Renaissance lady and it is included in the first section of the book, labeled "Piedras de Bérgamo" (Bergamo stones). As I propose to analyse later, "Simonetta Vespucci" is a vindication of Renaissance and Mediterranean culture. Botticelli's painting is very loosely present in the poem. We know it is about the "The Birth of Venus" because of Andy Warburg's research. He identified the model who was posing as Venus. According to Warburg, Simonetta Vespucci was born in Genoa, married Marco Vespucci, and died of consumption at the age of 23. According to Vasari, Warburg tells us that Botticelli had known Simonetta and drew her portrait for the duke of Cosimo (Warburg 2005: 107). There is more to be said. As the German scholar documents, Botticelli could have followed the poem the *Giostra* in the depiction of Simonetta as Venus in "The Birth of Venus" (Warburg 2005: 74, 117). Venus represents an idealized version of Simonetta as a nymph while at the same time being faithful to her actual physiognomy.

I would like to first consider Colinas' concern for Mediterranean culture, which is clearly bound to the Renaissance, at least as Colinas regards it, and second read Colinas' "Simonetta Vespucci" against "The Birth of Venus" and compare it to "The Paltry Nude..."

In 1988 Antonio Colinas published *El sentido primero de la palabra poética* (The first meaning of the poetic word), a collection of essays in which he expressed the core philosophy of his poetics up to that moment. The book was divided into five sections. The essays in the first three sections relate to Ancient Greece and Rome, the Renaissance, Romanticism, his poetics and some twentieth-century poets. From these thirty essays I

<sup>5</sup> Imagism is the name given to a movement in poetry, originating in 1912 and represented by Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and others, aiming at clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images.

will choose three, "Paisaje mediterráneo y teoría lírica" (Mediterranean landscape and lyrical theory); "Actualidad y esencia de lo griego" (Contemporaneity and essence of the Greek); and "Florencia: ciudad a la luz del conocimiento" (Florence: city in the light of knowledge).

Colinas resorts to Greek mythology to articulate a theory of poetry in "Paisaje mediterráneo y teoría lírica" (Colinas 2008: 34). He recalls Hesiod's *Theogony*. On the slopes of mount Helicon, the Muses gave him a branch of a bay laurel so that he could write poetry. What Colinas regards as prominent in the story is the setting for the action and the gift of the plant as a gift of poetry. This is a secluded spot on which man has left no imprint. It is a natural area fit for leisure where serenity and solitude reign. In short, the most appropriate place for a poet to live and write. It is not coincidence that the piece of land is located in southern Europe, in Greece, the origin of Mediterranean culture as Colinas implies when he chooses Hesiod's *Theogony* instead of the many other mythological poems that narrate the origin of the world. What is actually important for Colinas is that it is there that the poet loses his reason and may make use of words to sing the mystery of the world. The word is not any mean word; it is the sublime word of poetry. The land, culture and the poetic rapture are bound together from the beginning of history in Colinas' interpretation of *Theogony*. He does not stop at this period and binds it with Romanticism across the centuries. The poetic rapture will resurface again in the romantic poets (Colinas 2008: 35). The Sublime will be then expressed by means of harmony and rhythm, which are core components of poetry for Colinas, as he argued in *Tratado de Armonía* (Treaty on Harmony) (1991). A few pages later, Colinas mentions the Mediterranean sea in "Paisaje mediterráneo..." He is well acquainted with other writings that present the image of the serene and inspired man, alone in his lonely place. This is an image that recurs throughout history because as Colinas puts it –there is no other comparable image with the exception of that of the unknown ship that fares the sea bound to a dubious harbor (Colinas 2008: 36). Colinas imagines the blend of both images, the secluded land and the unknown sea. The poet, then, would contemplate the land and the sea. He admits that this is what he attempted in the first and last poems of *Noche más allá de la noche* (Night beyond night). There may be a town as well, always represented by its ruins. Colinas is not interested in the bustle of contemporary towns or in urban life in the

past. For him, the town is always represented by ruins as these symbolize the destructive power of time and the frailty of human works (Colinas 2008: 37). As García Gual analyses in his article on Colinas, Ancient Greece and its culture are not simply a reference in Colinas' poetry. If Colinas mentions Greece in several of his essays and opens a book such as *Noche más allá de la noche* with quotations from pre-Socratic philosophers, this is due to his regard for Greece as a living presence still meaningful to him (García Gual 1997: 203). For Colinas, Greece is both a mythical place of text and context (Editor 1990: 10). In Greece, Colinas attempts to find the absolute origin where despair has not yet risen (Fernández and Mora 2004: 114). Imagination is not, thus, an act merely of the mind. It occurs as a blending of sensuous perception and the active construction of the mind. It is a recollection of sentiments, remembrances and images that are transformed in the mind and are given a sense because they are put together and linked to a given interpretation of culture.

Colinas' interest in Classical culture comes directly from Romantic poets such as Friedrich Hölderlin and Giacomo Leopardi (García Gual 1997: 204) while it is alien to the Parnassian vogue of the *fin-de-siècle*. Colinas establishes a bond between pre-Socratic philosophy and poetry in the sense that philosophy before Socrates was not severed from poetry. Examples of this are to be found in the mythical sense of the world, the symbols, some paradigmatic figures and the Mediterranean landscape (Colinas 2008: 204). This is the reason why he connects Mediterranean culture and Greece. All that is Mediterranean becomes a symbol of Greece and Colinas places ruins first among all symbols. Greece and the Mediterranean culture are a synecdoche for inspiration, the birth of poetry and culture.

His interest in ruins is obviously linked to the setting. For Colinas the archetypal setting is the blend of land, sea and ruins. Here does poetry spring. According to Colinas the archetypal setting and the primary lyric are realities that are inextricably joined (Colinas 2008: 38). It is worthwhile to note the contrast that Colinas sets. On the one hand, he recreates a world that has disappeared long ago, its only remnants being ruins, which function as a reminder of that vanished world. On the other, he brings to actuality the idea of a lyric that is at the beginning of the poetical process, and is, consequently, virtual as it has not been actualized by any poet. The importance

of the lyric resides in its potentiality in containing all the possibilities and excluding everything that is of inferior quality in terms of poetry. Poetry is the result of the actualization of these possibilities in a context in which civilization, Greek civilization in particular, has been reduced to ruins. Only from the remnants of civilization that have not yet been destroyed does there exist the possibility of a new beginning for poetry. The idea of civilization, thus, is the idea of the destruction of an ideal and the everlasting remembrance of that loss. Meditation on mortality gives way to the need for poetry. Imagination, then, is linked to the perception of the finite quality of human culture. This realization of mortality does not, however, end in despair or in the baroque motif of disillusionment.

Greece claims the absolute origin of culture in Colinas' book, and more particularly in "Paisaje mediterráneo y teoría lírica" and "Actualidad y esencia de lo griego". Naturally, his examination of Greek culture must be regarded as an exploration in order to argue for a poetics, but we should not disregard the fact that he found predecessors such as Aby Warburg or John Joachim Winckelmann and poets such as T.S. Eliot and much more importantly, Ezra Pound, without forgetting Romantic poets such as Leopardi and Hölderlin. Colinas found in their philosophy of culture –not always explicitly stated by these writers– the background from which to start his scholarly investigation which are both of Western culture throughout history and of the foundations of his own poetry. For Colinas, Greece is the starting point of literature, science, political thought, philosophy, medicine and geography (Colinas 2008: 45), as well as the origin of poetry.

Within his system of philosophy of culture, after the essays which he devotes to Greece, Colinas turns to Italy and the Renaissance for his poetics. For Colinas, as he argues in "Florencia: ciudad a la luz del conocimiento", European civilization is clearly divided into two distinct periods: before and after the Italian Renaissance, with the heart of the Renaissance being set in Florence (Colinas 2008: 94). The main feature of Florence was its equilibrium, contrasting with the bustling commercial activity of Venice and Rome (Colinas 2008: 94). Vitality and equilibrium were the bases of Florentine life and account for the extraordinary growth of the city. During the Medicis reign, Florence became the center of Ancient Greek and Latin culture. Its main aim was the achievement of Beauty which Florentine artists and philoso-

phers strived by means of Renaissance Neo-Platonism. In the essay he mentions writers who felt enchanted by Florence. Not only does he mention Boccaccio, Fra Angelico, Gozzoli, Giotto or Dante, whose lives were inextricably bound to Florence, but also John Rushkin, Jacob Buckhardt, and Walter Pater, who probably were not automatically associated with the city although they wrote about it (Colinas 2008: 98). Not surprisingly he mentions Simonetta Vespucci's fate and her role as a model for poets and painters alike (Colinas 2008: 100).

As Martínez Fernández analyses, Colinas is one of the few writers truly interested in the Renaissance. For Colinas the Renaissance marks a historical milestone that gives a sense of totality and harmony to existence. Among the trends present in the period, Colinas chooses the Neoplatonic current because he regards it as being more effective in the search for harmony in the total union of man and universe (Martínez Fernández 1988: 488). Just as important is its significance to transcendence. For Colinas, Italy is a pretext for a reflection on his poetry (Alonso 1997: 87). This may be extended to his concern for Greece as well. Ancient Greece and the Italian Renaissance serve as starting points to elaborate a poetics and a body of poetic writings that will be centered on beauty and harmony. Nonetheless, the difference is important since what has been left of Greek culture is only fragmentary and enshrouded in legend, while Renaissance Italy offers a sound body of architectural, sculptural and pictorial works.

What Colinas attempts to demonstrate in the essays is the continuity between Ancient Greek culture and the Italian Renaissance in an attempt to link his own poetics via Romanticism, particularly, Italian Romanticism as represented by the poet Giacomo Leopardi. I do not wish to go into any depth in the analysis of the Italian poet; let it suffice to be mentioned in Colinas' essays "El sentido primero de la palabra poética" (Colinas 2008: 17-33) and "El infinito en Leopardi y el infinito poético" (The infinite in Leopardi and the poetic infinite) (Colinas 2008: 120-132). This purpose explains why he is not actually concerned with the description of the painting "The Birth of Venus," nor with a fairly approximate reenactment of it in "Simonetta Vespucci". I will analyze later, in conclusion, that the poem is rather a reflection on his poetics.

"Simonetta Vespucci" is an address to the young lady who served as a model for Botticelli's paintings. While Colinas is directly addressing her, he



focuses on a limited number of her physical characteristics. Unlike the painting, which narrates the Greek myth, the poem contains no action. As I have noted before, the poem is part of the first section of the book and shares some characteristics with some of the poems contained in the same section. Some of these poems, "Simonetta Vespucci" included, are dramatic monologues properly speaking or a variant of that poetic mode. The British poet Robert Browning is known as the author who took the dramatic monologue to its highest peak. It was later used by T.S. Eliot, as this form allowed a large degree of impersonality. In Spain, Cernuda vindicated it and wrote a substantial number of poems in this form. The dramatic monologue is a poem in which a fictional character narrates a situation that may be external or may be personal and is supposed not to be a direct mirror of the poet's feelings. From the poetic "I" of Romanticism, Browning shifted to a poetic alterity that continued at least during the first half of the twentieth century and that in the case of Spanish poetry was introduced by Cernuda as an inheritance of British Romanticism (Perojo Arronte 2007: 174-180). What is important for my analysis is not the origin of the form and the path it followed till the dramatic monologue reached Spain, but the repeated use in the first section of "Sepulcro..." Colinas is giving voice to some of his most beloved poets or historic persons, such as Novalis, Giacomo Casanova or John Keats. In other cases, "Encuentro con Ezra Pound" for instance, he addresses a visitor to tell him how he can find Pound's house. Similarly, "Simonetta Vespucci", as I have said, is an address to the lady who was the model for the portrait Botticelli painted. Colinas takes for granted that the reader knows all the details of the model's life via Aby Warburg. As in the other poems of this section, "Simonetta Vespucci" exemplifies one of Colinas' concerns with culture. In this case, the concern is with Renaissance culture. The previous analysis of Colinas' essays shows the role that Italian Renaissance, as a part of Mediterranean culture, plays in the poet's works. "Simonetta Vespucci" stands as a synecdoche for Renaissance and for a worldview that favors harmony and beauty. For Colinas, the portrait of the young lady epitomizes the characteristics of the period. Likewise, as the poet takes for granted that the reader knows the story of the historic Simonetta, the poem does not contain

any reference to "The Birth of Venus". Botticelli's painting is not important in itself but as a symbol of Renaissance culture that may illustrate Colinas' cultural concerns. The decontextualization of Simonetta, in the sense that Colinas does not refer to "The Birth of Venus", indicates that the values that Colinas supports are not affected by time and may be found in any historical period.

What is most interesting is the references to cultural symbols, such as Judith or Venus (Colinas 1984: 119). These are historic personae who belong to Jewish and Latin cultures. Their inclusion in the poem allows Colinas to suggest the provenance of the persona of the poem. Furthermore these allusions fix the limits to the scope of the poem. For Colinas, classical culture, as composed of Greek, Latin and Jewish cultures, and its inheritor, Renaissance culture, cannot be modified though any person can appropriate them in any given period.

The allusion to the myths is countered by the very cryptic allusion to Simonetta's early death: "por tu delicadeza/ la tarde se hace lágrima,/ funeral oración,/ música detenida" (Colinas 1984: 119).<sup>6</sup>

The timelessness of the myths is now replaced by the transience of the person who was the model for the work of art. Colinas confronts eternity and impermanence with the aim of pointing out how values last throughout the centuries.

Lines 16 to 19 refer to Botticelli's painting and give a twist to the poem. Before these lines, it was merely the description of a young lady who had died young. Afterwards, Colinas embeds the poem in the pictorial tradition. Still he does not narrate, he simply points to features which for him are most important: the sea, the long hair and the long legs. With these few components, and the reference to the painter, Colinas accomplishes the reenactment of the painting within a tradition that overtly points to the original.

The poetic constituents of the poem cooperate in the creation of the classical-like appearance. The rhythm of the poem is achieved by means of short lines in which the melopoietic aspect becomes central. The sense of rhythm and musicality is achieved by means of repetition: "Simonetta:/ por tu delicadeza/ ... / Simonetta Vespucci:/ tienes el alma frágil/ ... / Simonetta Vespucci:/ por tus dos ojos verdes/ ... / Simonetta Vespucci:/ que has nacido en Florencia." (Colinas 1984: 119).<sup>7</sup> These repe-

<sup>6</sup> Because of your delicacy/ the evening becomes tear,/ funeral prayer,/ still music (Translations are mine in all cases).

<sup>7</sup> Simonetta:/ because of your delicacy/.../Simonetta Vespucci:/ your soul is frail/.../Simonetta Vespucci:/ due to your two green eyes/.../ Simonetta Vespucci:/ you who have been born in Florence.

titions occur throughout the poem: "tienes el alma frágil/ ... / tienes el alma fina" (Colinas 1984: 119)<sup>8</sup>, and: "por tus dos ojos verdes/ ... / y por tus trenzas largas/ y por tus largos muslos." (Colinas 1984: 119-120).<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the description of the model composes, despite its sketchy nature, the figure of a person adorned with harmonious beauty.

Colinas' writings on culture, which include art, philosophy and literature, are consistent with "Simonetta Vespucci". They work as the foundation on which Colinas' poetics built his poetry during the first stage of his career. Though he is a Post-modernist poet, he is not concerned with the disappearance of the classicist artistic paradigm; Colinas still strives to create poetry that is rooted in tradition while at the same time it is contemporary. In "Simonetta Vespucci", the choice of the topic, the mythological allusions and the rhythm of the poem point towards that appreciation of classical culture. The incompleteness of the description and the lack of classical stanzas indicate that Colinas does not attempt a sort of outdated recreation of Botticelli's painting.

### 3. Conclusions

Colinas manages to give the poem a soft, classical-like cadence that reinforces the idea of classicism bound to the lady that Botticelli had as a model. Colinas takes for granted that the reader knows the pictorial tradition extensively and can understand the veiled allusions that he includes in the poem. While Stevens' poem is closer to the painting style of the Modernists, Colinas prefers the figurative tradition to describe the lady. Similarly, Stevens' poem is modernist, possessing most though not all of the characteristics of Modernism, whereas Colinas' poem is postmodernist, in that figurativism and the absence of avant-gardist features play an important role in the poem.

There are other important differences between Stevens' and Colinas' poems as regards to their adherence to Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus". Stevens' poem is, like the painting, basically narrative, while Colinas' poem is a description of the model Botticelli used for his painting, and also for a portrait as Aby Warburg describes in his much cited essay on the painting (Warburg 2005: 107-

113). While it is obvious that Stevens is writing about the possibilities of American art at the dawn of the twentieth century, Colinas is recreating the description of a young lady who epitomized all the artistic virtues for the Renaissance in Italy becoming the aesthetic model of Mediterranean culture for the Spanish poet.

Colinas is not interested, as Stevens was, in the creation of a new poetics different from European standards which could support a new American art. Colinas places himself within the European cultural tradition, which he regards as a continuum, much in the line that Eliot proposed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent". While Colinas' object was the development of a new poetics different from his Spanish predecessors, he would not seek it in the avant-garde movements or in the new artistic currents of the seventies. Rather, he looked back towards Italian culture to make it contemporary. Not surprisingly, where Stevens started his literary career at the beginning of Modernism and its associated avant-garde movements, Colinas started writing at the moment these movements started to show their first symptoms of consumption and decay. The impulse towards the new and shocking may be perceived in Stevens' poem while Colinas' is much more classical in its depiction. Stevens is basically interested in exploring new ways of representation much in the line of painters such as Cézanne or Picasso; Colinas' main concern is the revitalized use of the classical tradition at the end of last century. An analysis of both poems shows the distance that there is between the beginning and the end of the twentieth century in literature.

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<sup>8</sup> Your soul is frail /.../ your soul is delicate.

<sup>9</sup> And because of your long hair /.../ and because of your long legs.

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