

# The Cultural and Foundational Origins: Archeology, Ecology and Humanism in the Poetry of Antonio Colinas

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**Abstract:** Antonio Colinas is a Spanish poet from the generation of the late 1960s, the group of the *novísimos*. His poetry is grounded in a humanistic view of the past through his interest in topics such as archeology, ecology and Greco-Roman Antiquity. By looking at the past, the writer is able to establish relationships with the present era which reveal the need to reconnect with transcendental ideas and spiritual imagination. Colinas, however, is not a religious poet. Through his verse, he presents an appeal to humanistic memory which he sees as a cultural remedy for many of the problems that are a consequence of life in late modernity.

**Keywords:** archeology – ecology – transcendence – origins – the sacred

Antonio Colinas (1946-) is one of the most important poets of Spain from the 1970s onward. Although he did not appear in José María Castellet's anthology, *Nueve novísimos poetas españoles* (1970), he is widely considered a member of the *novísimos* or the generation of 1968. Colinas sees the role of poetry as that of recovering transcendental visions. That is why archeology and history are such an integral part of his work. A look at the past is the possibility of understanding the sacred power of the origins of civilization. Colinas is also interested in nature because landscape contains the possibility of metaphorical representations of otherworldliness. He is, however, not a religious poet in the sense that he promotes a certain institutionalized spiritual belief. The fascination with the past, along with a serene and ecological contemplation of nature, offers Colinas the possibility of criticizing the post-industrial age.

The poet, nevertheless, does not explicitly write about the problems of the era in which he lives. His reflections are usually a byproduct of his contemplation of history and nature through poetry. The critique comes about as a result of contrasting different historical ages. Colinas goes deep into the past and returns with opinions and reflections about the culture of the present. Colinas is a humanistic poet whose poetic thinking is

tied to an understanding and an appreciation of cultural history and mythology. He is fascinated with myths because of the ways people in the past interpreted their role in the universe. Compared to the other poets of his generation, however, he is different. Colinas is not interested, for example, in pop culture and the cultural media of the age like movies, television and advertising.<sup>1</sup>

*Sepulcro en Tarquinia* (1975), his fourth book of poetry, is his most important work from the 1970s. The poetry is influenced by the fact that Colinas lived in Italy between 1970 and 1974 where he taught Spanish in universities in Milan and Bérghamo. One of the poems is titled “Poseidonia, vencedora del tiempo”. José Enrique Martínez explains that the poem is based on the ruins of Paestum, an area located south of Naples where there are the archeological remnants of various Greek, classical temples dating from around 600 BC (159). Anyone visiting this place will discover an extraordinarily beautiful landscape with grass and mountains in the background. Paestum was an important Greek city in Magna Grecia. It was founded as a sanctuary to the god Poseidon, and thus it was first named Poseidonia. There are three ancient Greek temples that are remarkably well preserved, especially the colonnade. Colinas writes about the architecture and the connection with the divine:

pero sin duda son bocas divinas  
 las que han hablado al mar desde este monte  
 en donde vibra denso el birimbao  
 del pastor y tan sólo quedan restos  
 de una bárbara, herbosa arqueología (4-8)

Only the archeological ruins remain but these conjure up in the mind of the poet a people that lifted their arms to the sky:

pienso que los humanos no desnudan  
 bastante sus palabras, ni sus hábitos  
 ni hacia los astros tienden ya las manos. (11-13)

“Castrá Petavonium”, another section of the book, is dedicated to the ruins of a roman campground in the province of Zamora, in Spain, close to the area where Colinas was born and grew up in the province of León. The foundation of the Roman city of Petavonium was based on this campground, home to the *Legio X Gemina*, the legion that guarded the routes to Gallaecia, present day Galicia. The camp was founded in the year 25 BC after the time of the Cantabrian wars. Colinas’ poem describes the life in the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Colinas begins to publish later than the other *novísimos* whose first books appear during the second half of the 1960s. His first two poetry books date from 1969, and his first important work, *Truenos y flautas en un templo*, dates from 1972.

camp. The bodily strength of the soldier is represented with the image of the muscle against the leather: “el músculo se afana con el cuero”. The text also describes the precinct at dusk with a full moon and the horses in the fenced area. Cauldrons boil gold and prostitutes come to satisfy the lonely soldiers while outside there is the smell of manure. The poetic recreation of the camp produces an ambiance that is captivating, and the writer seems transfixed as he contrasts the culture of his own era with that of the Roman settlement. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, in contrast, seems laughable:

*Petavonium*: los caballos dentro de la cerca  
 miran un anochecer con pus y luna llena,  
 horno bullente de oro, rameras, el estiércol,  
 hoy qué arcaica la noche, qué risa el siglo XX  
 (adobe con escarcha y vísceras de perros) (9-13)

In an interview with Bruno Marcos in 2013, Colinas explains that ruins are not outdated places full of death but rather fertile symbols (1). They are foundational spaces where the lessons of the past are still alive. Ruins are like fountains that are continually flowing with information about a past that, in turn, also illuminates the present. He mentions Petavonium in the interview because this place is specifically related to his own life, being located so close to the area where he grew up, but he also mentions the importance of the legends that emanated from that space, stories that he heard from his grandparents. Archeological ruins, thus, can also be interpreted as texts, as narratives that have been passed on from generation to generation. Colinas sees them as places that house, through time, the mystery of the sacred. In turn, this is communicated to the writer who relives it through verse. The past becomes not only a fountain of sacred symbols and visions but also a place of individual and cultural identity. This is what the poet considers missing in late modernity. But he does not write about these topics because he detests modern progress. He sees his role as a poet as that of recovering from the past something valuable. This type of poetic contemplation leads to a deeper understanding of the present age.

Jerome A. Miller, from a philosophical perspective, comments that late modernity has an attitude towards the world that is based on a multiplicity of views, frameworks and discourses. This attitude supposes that the world is like a game. Any attempt to view multiplicity as an all-encompassing reality is viewed with a certain level of suspicion (95). In the following passage, Miller describes the attitude as being pragmatic and not interested in grandiose ideals:

Articulated in philosophical terms, such an attitude describes itself as cheerfully pragmatic, and celebrates its recovery from the age-old philosophical quest for a non-destructible system of doctrine. The adept practitioner of such an attitude, precisely because he has not been caught

in the throe of the world, can move among all of them with the cosmopolitan ease of a connoisseur. The imperturbability with which he shifts from one to another, his way of “caring and not caring” about whatever world he chooses to live in, are the characteristics of a distinctively post-modern version of the peace that surpasses all understanding. (97)

Miller comments that if nothing is sacred, then being a part of any kind of *world* brings about an emptying effect. The “mortal seriousness”, that is necessary to view the world as something more than just a game, is absent (97). Colinas’ interest in the Classical world of Antiquity and his Romantic attitude towards nature, are ingredients that presuppose a critique of advanced modernity. Juan José Lanz locates Colinas after the aesthetic renovation of Spanish poetry of the middle of the 1960s, when neo-surrealism is waning (56). This is the time of the neo-romantic influx in the generation, which can be located at the beginning of the 1970s. Lanz mentions the influence in Colinas of German Romanticism, especially poets such as Hölderlin and Novalis, There is no doubt that there is a relationship between Colinas’ refined cultural aestheticism –at the beginning very much based on his fascination with Italy– and his views about what modern society is lacking.

As postmodern philosopher Gianni Vattimo explains “the society in which we live is a society of generalized communication. It is the society of the mass media.” (1). A society of communication, through television, newspapers, movies and technology, produces a multiplicity of images that entails what Vattimo calls a loss of a “sense of reality”(8).<sup>2</sup> It is precisely this loss that is at the heart of Colinas’ evocation of the past. In the interview with Bruno Marcos, Colinas explains that archeological ruins can be either places of lost memory or spaces of rebirth where one can feel and think with a new sense of freedom. The past, thus, can be liberating as something that is born in the identity of the individual and can then be transmitted to the society as a whole: “algo que nace de nuestro interior y que luego proyectamos en la sociedad” (2). Ruins are, thus, the origins of collective memory. Colinas also comments that archeology has not always had, in his literary generation, a real and fertile meaning, but rather tends to be understood in a superficial way as poetry of *culturalismo* where ruins are more of a decorative setting or a cultural motif. The poet explains that he has done something different with this topic:

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<sup>2</sup> The realm of measurable objects has “become the world of merchandise and images” (8). Vattimo’s explanations of the culture of postmodernity, based on the impact of the mass media society, are pertinent in clarifying Colinas’ view that late modernity has become detached from the exploration of origins. If society relies solely on the media for its information, it will not take into account more humanistic views present in fields such as history, mythology and literature.

yo he procurado que los espacios de las ruinas sean algo más, y eso se aprecia en efecto muy bien en mi libro *Sepulcro en Tarquinia*. En él, las ruinas de nuestro noroeste contienden en un diálogo fecundo con las ruinas del mediterráneo, con las ruinas de Italia. Pero siempre son espacio de vida, lugares en los que se desarrolla la verdadera vida del poema. La cultura no es tal cultura si debajo de ella no tiembla la vida, la experiencia de ser. (2)

Archeological ruins must, above all, have a real connection with humanity. They must have a life that is determined by the *living* value that people give to them.

*Noche más allá de la noche* (1983) is a poetry book that was written between 1980 and 1981 at a time when the author is living in the Mediterranean island of Ibiza, a place that will become his residence for a total of 21 years. Colinas starts living there in 1977 and will remain until 1998. José Enrique Martínez explains that the first three years in Ibiza were the happiest of his life (27). Married since 1971, the poet now has children and many friends that lived on the island. He will cultivate his interest in archeology and be involved in different digs. He will also read about Primitive Oriental philosophy and culture and continue studying Classical antiquity. His readings include authors such as Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, the Spanish philosopher, María Zambrano, and Rainer Maria Rilke. The setting of the book is the island of Ibiza, a paradise of blue waters and stunning, dry, rock landscapes with panoramic vistas framed by olive or cypress trees.<sup>3</sup>

Kay Pritchett mentions the importance of the sea in the poetry of Colinas as a place of “archetypal significance” (278). Archetypes are an important concept in the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). For Jung, archetypes were universal patterns that came from the collective unconscious, and water as one of the most common symbols. Susana Agustín Fernández sees connections between Colinas’ poetry and Jung’s theories. Jung related the sea to the principle of regeneration; the sea is the collective unconscious where everything starts. Fernández observes a similar way of thinking in the poetry of Colinas. She indicates that the sea has cosmological significance as a source of origins: “en los poemas de Colinas el mar ofrece una nueva visión del cosmos en tanto que fuente generadora de dádivas. Para el poeta el mar es origen de todas las cosas.” (211).

The poems of *Noche más allá de la noche* are set in specific Mediterranean geographies but also in a world that has mythological significance. The contemplation of the sea leads to an understanding of the importance of the culture of Antiquity. Debicki characterizes the book as “the culmination of Colinas’ neoromantic verse”

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<sup>3</sup> José Enrique Martínez explains that for Colinas Ibiza has a double sense. On the one hand, it is symbolically a paradise; on the other hand, it symbolizes death. The landscape has extremes; it can be very dry with rock formations that can be desert-like and eerie, but it also has forests of pines embracing quiet beaches of peaceful blue water (28).

(199). In Poem III the light of the Mediterranean is described as a place of plenitude that incorporates the poet himself who becomes part of a symbolic universe:

pero aquí estás, oh mar, arrastrando espumas  
por mi piel, enredando rosales en mis brazos. (3-4)

Poem IV captures the sense of the timelessness of nature when it is related to cultural memory. The dolphins are symbols of the divine in this dream-like paradise that is resurrected from the past:

Allá en los cipreses, sobre el lomo del mar,  
veíamos saltar los felices delfines:  
divinidad fulgiendo sobre una agua de plata.  
Se había quedado quieto el tiempo en esta orilla  
desde aquella mañana melodiosa del mundo. (1-5)

The Greeks had called the islands of Ibiza and Formentera the *Pityússae*, a word that meant islands covered with pines. Poem VII is dedicated to Greece and the poet asks why Greek culture and mythic spirituality has endured after so many centuries. In the book of essays, *Del tiempo inspirado*, Colinas explains the importance of Classical Greece, a place where there was a fusion of nature, knowledge and creation (118-119). The ancient land was the symbolic equivalent of the mother but also of the virgin. If the religious temple communicated the union of the human and the divine, the land of Greece was a combination of blood and earth, blood and light. Colinas is not only describing the beauty of nature, but also searching for the significance of a civilization that gave meaning to the Mediterranean. In Poem XXV the poet asks if the time will come when the sleep-walking statues will again be unearthed. He evokes a time when the Mediterranean Sea was surrounded by many dilapidated cities that contained ruins and archeological sites. These were places where the shepherds walked peacefully with their sheep. It was a space of signs and symbols where the presence of memory gave humans a sense of awe and humility:

Naturaleza entonces mordía en la soberbia  
de los hombres –las ruinas– con zarzas, con cicutas.  
Todo el Mediterráneo lo cercaban ciudades  
en ruinas, y rebaños instauraban la paz  
en el mundo de nuevo. Todo era signo y símbolo; (3-7)

The poem is about statues that were discovered in the ruins of ancient Greek cities on the Mediterranean. Sometimes these artifacts were found casually while a farmer was sowing the land. The mutilated figures bring back a sense of fascination that makes

humans renounce their blind ambitions, which are always the precursors of war. The broken statue has a civilizing and a healing effect. The poet asks whether the time of rediscovery and renewed enthusiasm will come back:

¿Pero es que ya no va a volver aquel tiempo  
de la resurrección, el campo a ser fundado?  
¿Mañana qué estatuas enterradas podrán  
resucitar el Sueño, la ilusión de los hombres? (19-22)

*Noche más allá de la noche* is about renewal and harmony. For Colinas the island of Ibiza is more than just a landscape. As Susana Agustín Fernández notes, the island is for Colinas a way of life. When visiting the place, people can return to an existence that has a certain simplicity and purity, away from the dense and noisy metropolitan centres of Spain where everything is cement and asphalt (278). Life in Ibiza, Fernández comments, revolves around the Mediterranean sea, its culture, history and mythology: “Este mar fue la cuna de la cultura occidental y del pensamiento racional y a cuyas orillas nace la filosofía jónica que tanta importancia tiene en el pensamiento y en la poesía de Antonio Colinas.” (296). The critic also mentions that Colinas is recovering the essential nature of living next to the ancient sea: “se rescata la imagen del Mediterráneo esencial: se evoca el paso de las estaciones, el cultivo y la recolección de frutos; los fuegos que se prenden en las noches; el mar azul que tantos dones ofrece.” (297).

The Mediterranean shores are places of cultural history. Poem VIII is dedicated to Homer’s character, Ulysses, Poem X to a Roman legionary who dies in the north of Spain and Poem XI to the eruption in AD 79 of Vesuvius, the volcano that buried the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Greek mythology is present in Poem IX, a text based on the Parthenon, the temple built to the goddess Athena, completed in 432 BC. A visit to the temple site confirms that humans can approach the divine, and the divine tells the story of humankind, the passing of life and death:

Y perdí la noción de cuanto había sido.  
Y el sentido perdí asomado a la sima  
del límite y asido a ese conocimiento  
que, como tú, quemaba, astro caído, sed  
del tiempo en esa hora inmortal de mi hora.  
Yo cerraba y abría los ojos comprendiendo  
la cristalización de los dioses: el templo,  
la ruina de la luz, la tumba de la luz. (21-28)

The book is not only about nature, it also has a cultural quality which unites two structural themes that Susana Agustín Fernández identifies in most of the poetry of

Colinas: the importance of cultural traditions and the return to the foundational origins (164).

The poet implies that the return to nature, so important especially in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with so much development and construction going on everywhere in the planet, must be accompanied by humanistic knowledge. The ecological concerns that many have felt as important – not only at the end of the century but at the beginning of the millennium and beyond–, must be tied to a new look and study of cultural history. Writing about this topic, Harold Fromm comments that the modern person “is mostly unaware of a connection with Nature that has been artfully concealed by modern technology.” (33) Since technology has a remedy for almost everything, there is less of a need to seek spiritual transcendence. This type of disengagement, however, has produced what Fromm calls “a spiritual death” (32).

The poetry of Colinas is a reaction to the forgetfulness that characterizes the pragmatic culture and lifestyle of late modernity. It is a reaction against what Jerome A. Miller calls “the master suspicion that there simply are no matters of life and death because life and death are not matters of ultimate gravity” (97). Miller explains that contemporary society excludes the possibility of becoming engaged with “that trembling delight, that presentiment of the sacred, which is the first stirring of an ecstatic and mortal passion.” (99). Miller describes an attitude that is cheery and practical because it has liberated itself from philosophical doctrine. It is happily imperturbable but it is also ambivalent. It sometimes cares and other times it is completely unconcerned. It has shielded itself from painful struggles.

The need to evoke foundational spaces brings to mind the thinking of Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the Romanian historian of religion, author of *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957). Eliade argues that while many people believe their world to be entirely secular, they are always connected, even if it unconsciously, to the remembrance of something that is sacred. The revelation of the sacred is *hierophany*, a manifestation of the divine or the sacred in a place, situation or an object:

When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center. (21)

Even though Colinas is not a religious poet, he is a writer of metaphysical concerns. When he writes about the Parthenon, for example, he locates the Greek temple within a sacred space and his verse must honor that sanctity. The poem becomes a foundational song. The same is true when in his poems about Castra Petavonium, the ruins of the



ancient roman campgrounds in the north of Spain. Susana Agustín Fernández has noted that all the elements of nature in Colinas' poetry have metaphysical connotations (101). The critic recognizes the influence of Eliade's thinking in Colinas and explains that the poetry has mystical and entrancing qualities which she describes as Orphic.<sup>4</sup> The physical world is abandoned and poetry descends into the depths of being: "el poeta continúa su búsqueda incansable guiado por la música de Orfeo que proporciona bienestar, despeja inquietudes y facilita el hallazgo de la Luz." (101).

Mircea Eliade comments that in ancient times –when human culture was in its beginnings–, human beings saw themselves as a cosmos. They were a part of the god's creation. Their lives were tied in with the universe: "the cosmos became the paradigmatic image of human existence." (165). Myths portray how foundational events made society and the natural world into a comprehensible totality. Myth is the explanation of origins. Anna White has studied Eliade's thinking and finds that refocusing on his ideas can be useful in Religious Studies because modern society has wandered away from the natural environment. White believes that revisiting Eliade's ideas is valuable because the sensitivity to the concept of hierophany can be curative and lead to reconstructing the world: "we have rejected or forgotten the concept of sacred space. In so doing, we have become so desensitized and separated from our very roots of existence within the ecosystems that we are now proceeding to destroy it." (1). Valuing sacred space once more does not mean a return to superstitions but rather a way to redirect the sensitivity of what she calls "Homo Economicus" (1).

In the same way that it can be argued that Eliade's holistic explanations are relevant in the contemporary world, it can also be claimed that the views of poets are essential because they are able to communicate visions of the sacred in a way that is different from that of a professor or a scholar of Religion. A poet has the verbal gift and the artistic know-how. For example, music plays an important part in Poem I of *Noche más allá de la noche*. The dark oboe plays the music of the mystery of the cosmos. The divine concert can be heard from the slopes full of olive trees and vineyards that look down towards the Mediterranean Sea. It is an Orphic music that comes from the depths of time:

Oscuro oboe de bruma, cómo sepulta el mar  
 tu solemne sonido que despierta a los muertos.  
 Aquí en esta ladera que cubre el olivar  
 sangre y labio repiten musicales conciertos.  
 La ladera y sus soles que maduran los vinos,  
 la tensión del azul volcado en los cielos,

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<sup>4</sup> In Greek mythology, Orpheus was a musician and a poet who endeavored to recover his wife, Eurydice, from Hades, the underworld. He is an archetypal figure representing the musician that charms. One of Colinas' poetry books is titled *Jardín de Orfeo* (1988).

armonía y vacío en espacios divinos,  
horror al más allá tras las costas de Delos. (1-8)

Colinas will evoke the oboe's music in the last poem of the book, "Post-scriptum", giving the book a circular structure. J. E. Martínez states that this last poem is an invitation to contemplate, through the mysterious music, the sacred nature of the night (112). The last verse of the poem has, according to the critic, the influence of Taoism (245); the specific verse is "Adiós a la palabra, escoria de la luz" (245).

Classical mythology provides a way to view an age so different from the present. Myths are a path to a world where humans had a close spiritual connection with the environment, with the earth, the seas and the skies. Colinas is interested in myths not only because of the relation nature and ecology, but because myth is essentially a literary way of understanding the world. Some of his poems delve into the secrets of the night and evoke images of the dead and the underworld. The writer uses myths to imagine spaces that speak of the dead in his book *Jardín de Orfeo* (1988). According to Rafael Santiago Córdoba, the book has a neoromantic verse with reminiscences of poets from Central Europe such as Hölderlin and Novalis (62). Colinas uses the symbolic garden and the myth of Orpheus to penetrate a world of darkness where harmony has been lost. The first poem of the book is titled "Jardín-leteo".<sup>5</sup> Córdoba explains the role of this text in the first section of the book: "presenta un mundo mudable, fugitivo, corroído por la desolación, la derrota y la desazón." (62). "Jardín-leteo" describes the journey to a garden of the underworld. It is wintry there and there are wolfs, cypress trees and bronze statues of animals. Colinas' images are eerie and surreal. In one of the verses, there is a reflection on humans' need to witness the power of the sacred. But in the dark garden, they now have thirst for both greenery and ashes. After the final poetic representations of the darkness –hills, moons and seas–, one can finally hear the music of Orpheus:

Oscuro mundo, sol de carne,  
monte de aroma divino,  
ojo, o estrella, o sueño, sobre el cuerpo de la mar,  
luna de tiempo en cielo de dolor,  
vida en el labio negro del alma. . .

Sólo sabemos que una música de sangre  
suen a y se detiene en la noche de la luz. (39-46)

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<sup>5</sup> *Leteo* is the equivalent of Lethe, one of the five rivers of Hades. Lethe was the river of forgetfulness. By combining the word with *jardín* in the title of the poem, Colinas emphasizes the indistinct nature of what Hades is like. He imagines a dark, ambiguous place that is both garden and river.

The poem is a metaphorical representation of the world of darkness. The opposite is the world of light, which in Colinas is often associated with the cheerful but serene luminosity of the Mediterranean.

From 1998 on, the poet will return to the peninsula, going back to Castile. He will reside in the university city of Salamanca, not far from the northern region of León where he was born and grew up. In 1992 he publishes *Los silencios de fuego* and in 1997 *Libro de la mansedumbre*. There is also another symbolic light in Colinas' poetry and that is the burning flame, a symbol of love and harmony, that Colinas borrows from the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz.<sup>6</sup> The first section of *Libro de la mansedumbre* is titled "La llama", the second is "Manantial de la luz", and the last is "La tumba negra", a long poem about travels in the eastern part of Germany. In a review of this book, Gloria Rey Faraldos comments that the first part is about tranquility and a search for a sense of completeness: "El poeta halla la plenitud en un nuevo estado, el de la mansedumbre o la quietud... es la armonía del espíritu en sosiego" (1). Martínez explains that Colinas' symbolic flame is about inner plenitude: "la llama es la imagen de esa plenitud que nace de dentro, alimentada por la sensibilidad ante la naturaleza, el arte, el sueño de los lugares armónicos" (114).

Much of *Libro de la mansedumbre*, however, is about opposites that combat each other. The concept of mansedumbre is not always about serenity; one arrives at inner peace after the pains and sorrows of life. It is not easy to be guided by mansedumbre for humans are always being deceived and ambushed by the contingencies of life. Within the book, the feeling of plenitude comes and goes as the poet seeks to understand so many matters: his own personal journey, historical conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the pursuit of harmony and wisdom through humanistic ventures. In "La tumba negra" the poet is visiting the eastern part of Germany, cities such as Leipzig, Weimar and Magdeburg. He confronts the reality of a century that is ending, an era full of turmoil and a country that has gone through so many devastating changes: Hitler, Stalin and now the reunification. The memories of war, concentration camps and totalitarian regimes are constantly evoked in the poem. The writer seeks a sense of harmony with the world at large, but it is impossible when he reflects on an age in which destruction has been so prevalent:

¿Cómo escribir la crónica de confusos terrores?  
 ¿Un siglo y otro siglo se habrá de alzar la ira  
 para talar el árbol de la música?  
 ¿Hasta cuándo tendrá que rodar la cabeza de Orfeo  
 sobre los pedregales de la Historia? (130-134)

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<sup>6</sup> The poem is "Llama de amor viva" by Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591). Colinas has studied the poetry of the Spanish mystic in the essay titled "Contrarios contra contrarios (El sentido de la llama sanjuanista)" in *Del pensamiento inspirado II*, pg. 138-148. See José Enrique Martínez's explanation (249).

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is an opportunity to reflect on the legacy of the era. The poet sees the century as an era full of darkness. Political ideologies have brought about Nazi fascism and Stalinism. The frenzy of economic development has produced impersonal places full of concrete and asphalt, and pollution has become a worldwide concern.

A poem that describes ecological concerns is “El valle, frontera de los siglos”, a text included in the first section of *Libro de la mansedumbre*. The poem presents the poet’s feelings about the last decade of the century. He alludes to the feverish impulse to urbanize everything. The metaphorical valley in the poem, symbol of the century, is being destroyed by construction:

No cesan de avanzar  
 por el bosque las hachas y las sierras  
 de quienes urbanizan,  
 pero aún llueven sobre él los astros misteriosos  
 que ya nadie contempla, que ya nadie escucha,  
 y buscan un refugio por sus cuevas  
 los animales puros. (4-9)

The poem describes a world in which nature is being ignored. The text makes reference to books that are not opened and not read. Where can one go, the poet asks, if thoughts are dying and love only exists in the humble book that has been consigned to oblivion?

¿Adónde ir si muere el pensamiento  
 y el amor sólo es un sueño entre las páginas  
 del libro humilde que ya nadie abre  
 del libro pobre que ya nadie lee? (14-17)

The author’s pessimism is based on a society that has advanced technically but is disconnected from nature, from its origins and from humanistic foundations. When the evening comes, the birds disappear and the new medium, television, takes over. Machines full of fantasies substitute the book of knowledge:

Con las últimas sombras se van los ruiseñores.  
 Con las primeras luces  
 regresan los televisores con reflejos de sangre. (30-32)

There is an appeal in *Libro de la mansedumbre* to humanistic thinking. In “La tumba negra”, the poet witnesses the profusion of construction in an area of Germany that is catching up with the West in the effort of reunification. The loud bulldozers in the

poem are symbols of economic advancement, but the poet also values the legacy of Hölderlin, Novalis, Goethe and Händel, and, above all, Johann Sebastian Bach whose music is a major theme in the poem since it becomes the symbolic remedy to a history of terror. Bach's music is for Colinas a symbol of hope for the future of the country. The writer's visit to Leipzig and his meditations in front of the tomb of the composer are, as Gloria Rey Faraldos has noted, the beginning of Colinas' humanistic pilgrimage: "Un viaje a Alemania y la visita a la tumba de Bach son el punto de partida del peregrinaje del poeta, convertido en la voz del hombre inmerso en la contingencia de la historia." (1).

The humanities are ever-present in the cultural thinking of Colinas. This is not surprising in a writer who has delved in so many literary activities: poetry, translation, essays and even narrative.<sup>7</sup> His cultural scope ranges from Mediterranean Antiquity to ideas of harmony in Oriental thinking, and from Italian literature to Spanish mysticism. The Spanish literary magazine *Anthropos* published in 1990 an issue dedicated to his poetry. The editorial article observes that Colinas seeks to locate the poetic word in the roots of time, in the foundational spaces of history. But it also bridges that separation of times by bringing the foundational origins back to the present: "Colinas busca la raíz, el tejido interno de la luz y los átomos, la fuente primera... El discurso y la indagación poética de A. Colinas se asienta e ilumina en las raíces del tiempo que la creación transmuta en luz de actualidad y presencia." (5).

The fascination with archeology, nature and ecology, and humanistic achievements are part of the author's search for a poetry that refers back to cultural origins. Interviewed by Raúl Olvera Mijares in 2013, Colinas speaks about a dialogue in his work with roots, origins and foundations:

Los cuatro años que viví en Italia y los veintiuno en la isla de Ibiza fecundaron y acrecentaron ese diálogo. Luego está la presencia de lo telúrico, de la naturaleza, que no hay que entender nunca como expresión de lo rural, lo costumbrista o lo meramente paisajístico, sino como esa especie de *fuentes* de la que todo brota; un tema que ya está presente –siempre que se universaliza– en la tradición literaria desde los orígenes, desde la poesía china e hindú, desde Hesíodo y Virgilio en Europa, desde los cantos nahuas en América y, de manera central, en el Renacimiento italiano y en el Romanticismo centroeuropeo. También en muchos de los poetas americanos. (1)

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<sup>7</sup> He has written on Dante, *Sobre la vida nueva* (1996), and his essays are compiled in books such as *El sentido primero de la palabra poética* (1989) and *Del pensamiento inspirado* (2001). *Días en Petavonium* (1994) is a book of autobiographical short stories. He has translated several Italian writers into Spanish (Giacomo Leopardi, Salvatore Quasimodo, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Emilio Salgari).

The distinction he makes made between nature as landscape and nature as a foundational force is important, as is his explanation that everything comes from the natural world, even the beginnings of human civilization.

In his book of essays, *El sentido primero de la palabra poética* (2008), Colinas looks at the foundational nature of the lyrical word. He studies different historical periods: Antiquity, the Renaissance, Romanticism and Modernity. In the first section of the book, dedicated to Ancient times, Colinas presents several observations that are fundamental when taking into account the idea of origins. He states that primitive people used the poetic word to reveal the mystery of things (19). But he also clarifies that the mystery was not necessarily religious, it was related to a sacred view of nature. Reality hardly existed for the primitive peoples of the ancient era because it was so terrible and full of misery. But poetry was also a means for worship and part of the rites of initiation. It was the language that was used to speak with the gods or to imitate them. The poetic word could be an invocation, a psalm, a threat, a prayer or a curse. Since ancient times, poetry has had the role of revealing mysteries. Colinas goes on to say that when the sense of the sacred is lost or broken, there is also the disappearance of what he calls the chain of harmonious truths, “esa cadena de verdades armoniosas” (25). It is possible to end up in a period that seems to fulfill the goals of material and technical progress but is actually based on a displaced, empty sentimentalism, and an arid analytical empiricism. Science can become deformed and full of risks. In our own age, the excessive reliance on technology, along with the increasing sense that the environment is being destroyed, brings about a feeling that we have lost a sense of overall harmony: “que por nada está mejor representada en nuestros días – como ya dijimos – que por los abusos y excesos tecnológicos, por el saqueo de la naturaleza y por la muerte de la idea de ‘desarrollo infinito’ (25)”.

When Colinas criticizes the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is because behind technological expansion there should be, ideally, a humanistic vision, not just growth. A humanistic vision is only possible by being aware of the cultural past. What Colinas accomplishes in his poetry is reconnecting with that past, noting that people, in the present time, still have the need of fascination, of becoming captivated with the sacred nature of foundational myths. He is able to do this by merging the past with the present; foundational myths or stories are tied into the personal experiences and travels that are so often described in the poetic text. But it is important to note that, although the topics are often grand and lofty in the search for transcendental meaning, the poetry remains approachable with its clarity. It is scholarly, cosmopolitan and humanistic but not cerebral or overwhelming. The poetry can be symbolic, otherworldly and instilled with Orphic qualities, but it can also begin with a real place, one that the author is living in, or one that is part of his travels. Colinas also alludes to the landscapes of his childhood and youth in the region of León, the northern part of Castile. The high mountains and valleys of that area are settings for metaphysical thoughts that lead to symbolic views of quiet transcendence. The poetry of Antonio Colinas has the passion of the romantic

poet but is also imbued with a sense of serenity and humility that is often calming and welcoming.

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