

The Twilight of the Avant-Garde:
Spanish Poetry 1980–2000

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1980–2000

JONATHAN MAYHEW

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS

First published 2009 by
Liverpool University Press
4 Cambridge Street
Liverpool
L69 7ZU

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication data

A British Library CIP record is available

ISBN 978-1-84631-183-3

Typeset in Borges by
Koinonia, Manchester
Printed and bound by
the MPG Books Group

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Acknowledgments

Chapter 1 appeared in *Hispanic Review* (1999) under the title “The Avant-Garde and its Discontents: Aesthetic Conservatism in Recent Spanish Poetry.” I am grateful to Ignacio-Javier López for this accepting this article, and to Guillermo Carnero for circulating it among writers in Spain. Chapter 2 was published in *Contemporary Spanish Poetry: The Word and the World*, edited by Cecile West-Settle and Sylvia Sherno. Chapter 3 appeared in *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*. Elena Delgado, Jo Labanyi, and an anonymous reviewer were helpful in improving this piece. Chapter 5 appeared in a special issue *Diacritics* edited by José María Rodríguez-García. Without the help and encouragement of José María and an anonymous reviewer for *Diacritics*, this chapter would have been much weaker. Claudio Rodríguez-Fer was also helpful to me in giving me background on Valente’s acquaintance with Celan and Heidegger. Chapter 7 first appeared in *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*. I would like to acknowledge Michael Mudrovic and Randolph Pope for accepting this article, and Akiko Tsuchiya for permission to reprint it here. Randolph also accepted other articles of mine on related topics that did not make it into this book. His generous support of my work over the years is greatly appreciated.

The research for this book was supported, over the years, by the University of Kansas General Research Fund, the Hall Center for the Humanities, the Cramer family, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Kansas, and the Grant for Cultural Co-operation between U.S. Universities and the Spanish Ministry of Culture. Without the generous support of these institutions, this book could not have been written.

I owe a debt of gratitude to numerous individuals who have discussed contemporary Spanish poetry with me, or lent their moral and material support to me at various points along the way. This list includes Akiko Tsuchiya, Marjorie Perloff, David Shapiro, Elena Delgado, Silvia Bermúdez, Amalia Iglesias, Lola Velasco, Concha García, Ana Rossetti, Isla Correyero, César Antonio Molina, Juan Barja, Guillermo Carnero, Jesús Munárriz, Juan Carlos Mestre, Antonio Méndez Rubio, Jorge Riechmann, Steve Summerhill, José Manuel Cuesta Abad,

Antonio Gamoneda, Jaime Siles, Laura Scarano, Elena Delgado, Germán Gullón, Chris Soufas, Margo Persin, John Kronik, John Wilcox, and, last but certainly not least, the late Andy Debicki. My past and present colleagues at the University of Kansas and the Ohio State University—too numerous to list here—have also been helpful and encouraging.

The participants in the Poetics Seminar at the Hall Center for the Humanities have also been crucial to my ability to maintain a high level of intellectual stimulation. Thanks is due to Roberta Johnson and Victor Bailey (past and present Directors of the Hall Center respectively), for their on-going support of the Seminar (and of my own research). Ken Irby, Judy Roitman, Stan Lombardo, Van Kelly, Jill Kuhnheim, and Joe Harrington have been the most assiduous participants in the Seminar. My hunger for constant intellectual dialogue has also been fed on a daily basis by an informal network of “Poetry and Poetics Bloggers”: Jordan Davis, Heriberto Yépez, K. Silem Mohammad, Ron Silliman, Gary Sullivan, Nada Gordon, Jim Behrle, Tim Yu, Josh Corey, Stephanie Young, Henry Gould, Nick Piombino, and about a dozen others.

Various audiences who listened to oral versions of the material presented at several conferences also gave me valuable comments that helped me to clarify my ideas. Also, the students in several Graduate Seminars helped me to remain engaged with this material. Leslie Bayers wrote a paper on Concha García for one of these seminars that stimulated me to develop my ideas on this poet.

This book would not have existed without Luis García Montero. Although I doubt he will welcome a book that calls his aesthetic values into question, I must admit that his energy in pursuing his vision of poetry has shaped the recent history of Spanish poetry. If I had not read his eloquent essays outlining the ideological basis for the “poetry of experience,” I would never had begun this project.

Needless to say, none of the individuals or institutions listed above, least of all Luis García Montero, is responsible for any error of fact or judgment in this book. In fact, I have ignored a great deal of excellent advice.

Preface

This book arose out of my successive attempts, over the past decade, to define the state of contemporary Spanish poetry. The final section of my 1994 book, *The Poetics of Self-Consciousness*, was a critique of what I then perceived to be the dominant trend in Spanish poetry of the 1980s: the rejection of avant-garde/modernist values. In an article written in 1997 and published in *Hispanic Review* in 1999, I extended this critique by analyzing the explicit rejection of the avant-garde in the poetry and poetics of Luis García Montero and Felipe Benítez Reyes. This article, now chapter 1 of this book, has provoked many reactions. In Spain, it was applauded by poets and critics who shared my own avant-garde bias, and deplored, naturally enough, by the targets of my critique. Many colleagues in the field, including Laura Scarano and Chris Perriam, probably believe that I have gone too far in rejecting the “poetry of experience.” They are correct that my perspective in this article, and in subsequent writings, is a partisan one. Taking the position of a defender of avant-garde values in literature, I attempt to dismantle the arguments made by García Montero and his supporters in order to demonstrate their essentially conservative nature. Others in Spain, on the other hand, have been working along similar lines. Antonio Méndez Rubio’s essays, for example, present a similar critique of García Montero and the “poetry of experience,” using a different theoretical metalanguage but arriving at a conclusion perfectly consonant with my own. My reading of critics like Miguel Casado and José Manuel Cuesta Abad also leads me to conclude that my perceptions are not wholly out of synchrony with those of other well-informed observers of contemporary Spanish poetry.

While the “conservative” label is potentially inflammatory, I believe that it fits the phenomenon I am examining in a precise, almost *technical* sense. The conservative views cultural and social norms as rooted in *nature*. Any attempt to transgress such norms, from this perspective, are inevitably doomed to fail, since they go against the way things really are. Historically conditioned developments in literature, like nineteenth-century realism, are seen as eternally valid, even biologically based norms, whereas the modernist enterprise of re-thinking

literature from the ground up is seen as an historical anomaly. The return to a realism or verisimilitude based on unquestioned definitions of “human nature” and “normality” is a transparently ideological gesture that cries out for correction.

It is true that I fail to explore all of the ways in which poetry written under the rubric of García Montero’s “poetry of experience” might transcend or controvert the ideological presuppositions of this cultural conservatism. This task is perhaps better suited to scholars like Perriam, who are more sympathetic to “poetry of experience.” Perriam’s work on Luis Antonio de Villena, for example, shows the limitations of any blanket accusation of conservatism applied to all poets of this group. I am ultimately not convinced of the value of Villena’s poetry, but I believe that the best result my own polemical stance can provoke is more studies of this nature. In any case, my principal argument has never been that Luis García Montero is not a capable poet, when judged on his own terms. While I myself find his work unimpressive, my real point is that his polemic against the avant-garde—inseparable from his historical justification of his own pre-eminent position in literary history—relies on fallacious and ideologically questionable premises.

Like the Spanish poets I most admire, I see poetry as a mode of knowledge or *conocimiento*, not a trivial genre of mere “literature.” In this respect, I think it would be a mistake for me to adopt a stance of bland tolerance toward any and all modes of poetic writing. What I object to most, in the last analysis, is not the prevalence of less challenging styles of poetry, but the justification of such writing as “normal” or “hegemonic,” and the corresponding denigration of writing in the avant-garde tradition as illegitimate or historically unjustified. My own view of literature is rooted in the idea that there is no predetermined “natural” limit to what the arts can accomplish, and that efforts to impose such a limit are ideologically pre-emptive.

Ultimately, I believe, the ideological justification of the “poetry of experience” dovetails precisely with the way in which this movement positions itself in the cultural field. In an attempt to refine the position put forward in my initial critique of the “poetry of experience,” I wrote two follow-up pieces: “Three Apologies for Poetry,” and “Poetry, Politics, and Power.” In “Three Apologies,” I delineate three models for understanding the place of poetry within the larger culture. The first is based on the high-culture, high-modernist paradigm. The second is a “middle-brow” model, which interpellates the reader as an “ordinary citizen” of more limited cultural capital. The third is an avant-garde model, which sees poetry as a place for the creation of alternatives to mainstream culture. Using ideas adopted from the late Pierre Bourdieu, I place “poetry of experience” squarely in the center of this cultural field. It is true that the term “middle-brow” (a translation of Bourdieu’s term *moyen*) is

as inflammatory as my earlier use of the term “conservative.” Since my topic here is the *value* placed on poetry, the terms I am forced to use are themselves laden with value judgments: *élite* and *middle-brow* can be terms of abuse, but they accurately describe particular positions within the cultural field. While I endeavor to speak in a more measured, scholarly tone in this chapter, my sympathies remain clearly defined. Those who disagree with my position can argue either that I have not been accurate in my description of the literary terrain, or that “middle-brow” culture, which I tend to cast in an unfavorable light, is actually worthy of our respect and admiration.

In “Poetry, Politics, and Power,” I tried to look poetry from the outside, from the perspective of “Cultural Studies,” describing the causes and consequences of the definition of the “poetry of experience” as dominant or hegemonic within the cultural field. In order to do so, I turned to the critique of contemporary Spanish culture made by intellectuals like Eduardo Subirats and Carme Riera, and to the highly problematic, perhaps ironic, defense of literary normality in the work of poet, essayist, and novelist Félix de Azúa. I link the rise of poetry of experience to the shifting role of the literary intellectual in the transition to Spanish democracy. In this reading, this poetic movement, situating itself as culturally dominant, reflects the cultural policies (and politics) of Felipe González’s PSOE government and, more generally, of the political *élite* of the transitional period. I believe that my argument is a valid one. It is quite possible, of course, that I am mistaken, but I would need to see an alternative account more cogent than my own in order to be convinced.

Taken together, these three chapters define a position toward the real (or perceived) dominance of the “poetry of experience” in contemporary Spain. I may not have arrived (yet) at the ideal formulation of my perspective. Instead of trying once again to wrestle with this problem, however, I have preferred to offer these three attempts to tackle the same problem. In the remainder of the book I reverse the negative tenor of the discussion in order to look at some of the poetry that I think is most valuable in the current literary climate. The last two sections of the book, then, answer the question: what are the main alternatives to the dominant “poetry of experience”?

Chapter 4 attempts to examine one of the most problematic notions in the critical discourse surrounding Spanish poetry of the 1950s: the notion of “ordinary language,” or “apparently ordinary language.” Poets and critics alike tend to misjudge the *register* of poetic language of this period, calling it “colloquial” or “ordinary” even when it is demonstrably written in a higher or more literary register. This consistent misjudgment is not accidental, but rather is the result of an ideological distortion: the prevalent Marxist aesthetic demanded colloquialism, and the token gestures toward ordinary speech in the poetry of the period are still taken at face value. The notion of “ordinary language” acted

as a kind of *filter*: poetry that *seemed* to conform to the demand for colloquialism was seen as typical of the period (even when its language was actually more complex than critics realized), and poetry that was more obviously literary was seen as anomalous.

By correcting this misperception about the linguistic register in which this poetry is written, I am able to demonstrate the complex roots of some of the more stimulating poetry of the 1980s and beyond. José Ángel Valente, the dominant intellectual figure of the period, is the subject of Chapter 5. In order to define the unique nature of his contribution to contemporary Spanish poetics, I found it helpful to look at his translations of the German-language poet Paul Celan and his readings of Heidegger. The distinctiveness of Valente's achievement, I conclude, lies in his ability to refract and distill a certain Heideggerian tradition whose most powerful exponent in world literature is Celan himself.

Antonio Gamoneda has emerged in recent years as one of the most accomplished and influential writers in Spain. Along with Valente, he represents an alternative to the neo-conservative poets critiqued in Part One of this book. My analysis of *Libro de los venenos* explores the way in which this book tests the limits of genre, reflecting Gamoneda's theory that "poetry" is not a genre of literature, but a protean mode of writing that can take myriad forms. *Libro de los venenos* is not a book of poetry in the conventional sense, but rather a poetic re-writing of a Renaissance translation of an ancient botanical treatise. Gamoneda's complex palimpsestic transformation of Andrés de Laguna's edition of Dioscorides into a late twentieth-century work of poetic prose demonstrates the advantages of a more capacious definition of "poetry."

Part Three of this book addresses some critical problems posed by the spectacular rise of women poets in the 1980s. Although these women have suffered discrimination at the hands of a recalcitrant literary establishment, a number of critics in the U.S. consider their work to be more interesting, on the whole, than that of their male counterparts of the same "generation." In Chapter 7, "Gender Under Erasure," I argue that women poets have often used the strategy of questioning gender itself, rather than relying on the "gynocentric" strategies that critics like John Wilcox and Sharon Keefe Ugalde have emphasized. My two main examples are Luisa Castro and Amparo Amorós. I follow up this essay with chapters devoted to three other representative poets of the period: Ana Rossetti, Concha García, and Lola Velasco. In keeping with the strategy suggested in Chapter 7, I pay very little overt attention to the obvious fact that these poets are women. My aim is not to deny the existence of relevant gender issues, but, heuristically at least, to accord them the traditional privileges of "universality." Male writers are more often than not studied without any reference to their gender, while female writers are usually studied as *women*. This asymmetry shows no sign of disappearing any time soon, but one way of

addressing it is to reverse, albeit temporarily, the polarities. Obviously, this strategy has the disadvantage of failing to fully address questions of gender and sexuality that might be of interest to other readers of these poets, but to my mind at least it seems “authorized” by the way in which the poets themselves want to be treated. As Concha García puts it,

La creación de las mujeres está siendo relegada, considerada como apéndice de la “general” que es la masculina, y quizá se nota más en la poesía que en otros géneros literarios. En suma, me parece que cualquiera con un poco de sentido común tiene que empezar a plantearse la lectura de un autor o autora no desde el sexo, sino desde lo que dice. (qt. in Benegas, *Ellas tienen la palabra* 244)

(Creation by women is being relegated, considered as an appendix to the “general” creation which is masculine, and perhaps this is more notable in poetry than in other genres. In sum, it seems to me that anyone with a little bit of common sense has to begin to approach the reading of a male author or female author not with sex, but with what the text says.)

Ana Rossetti’s poetry is usually studied for its flagrantly sexual character. In fact, the lion’s share of the critical work on her poetry has been devoted to a few flamboyant poems. My reading of *Punto umbrío*, a work written at some distance from the poems that originally brought her this notoriety, brings to light a more subtle aspect of her work: her transformation of lyric conventions having to do with the expression of desire. Concha García, like Ana Rossetti, revises lyric conventions, but a comparison of the two poets would reveal that Rossetti is still working within the oldest conventions of European poetry, even as she introduces subtle variations to the tradition. García, in contrast, revises generic conventions much more boldly. In particular, she frustrates the expectation that the lyric poem must lead to a moment of transcendent epiphany. I read her rejection of poetic redemption in the context of the “poetry of experience”: García practices a poetic “realism” that explicitly rejects the more conservative uses of realism in the poetry of Luis García Montero. This is a poetry of everyday life that does not seek to dress up ordinary experience in conventionally literary patterns.

My final chapter is devoted to Lola Velasco’s *El movimiento de las flores*, an unpretentious and elusive poetic sequence. My argument is that this sort of poetry escapes easy categorization because of its refusal to offer any critical “hook,” that is, any ready-made opportunity for formulating the usual sort of critical thesis. This is the sort of poetry that is often neglected because it does not appear to offer ammunition for the sort of ideological debate of which I myself am so fond. It is neither radical nor conservative; it does not deconstruct Western metaphysics or gender categories, or turn the conventions of lyric poetry inside out. Despite its apparent modesty, however, I would argue that *El movimiento de las flores* exemplifies the best poetic writing taking place in contemporary Spain.

Taken together, these essays present a highly personal view of recent Spanish poetry. What strikes me most about this book is its radical incompleteness. It would be a mistake to view it as a definitive account of Spanish poetry of the last twenty years: it does not even include all the material that I myself have written on the subject. My intention has not been to produce a descriptive survey of the notable poets of the period, but to address a few central critical problems in the work of a very few representative figures. Needless to say, the absence of many notable names from these pages does not imply any negative judgment about their work. My neglect of poetry written in the other national languages of the Spanish state is perhaps the most notable gap in my presentation, but even my coverage of poetry written in *castellano* is inadequate by any reasonable standard. A responsible overview of contemporary Spanish poetry would have to include not only Gamoneda, but also the numerous younger poets influenced by his work, not only Rossetti, García, and Velasco, but also the many other women whose work is included in *Ellas tienen la palabra*. The *novísimos*, poets who came of age in the 1970s, are also largely absent from these pages. Their contribution to the poetry of this period still awaits a full discussion. Even my discussion of the “poetry of experience” is incomplete, in its focus on only a few representative poets. In my own defense, I can only say I am not the person to attempt a more comprehensive critical study, and that the writers that I *do* in fact study here are significant figures who have helped to shape the course of Spanish poetry over the course of the past twenty or twenty-five years.

I differ from many other critics of twentieth-century Spanish poetry in my overt interest in addressing questions of *value*. I am relatively uninterested, at this stage in my critical career, in simply producing new interpretations of literary texts. What concerns me most is the question of why poetry should matter to us in the first place, and what arguments are used to justify—or condemn—particular modes of writing. In particular, I am interested in why challenging, intellectually sophisticated poetry continues to meet with so much resistance, even within academia. What arguments can be made for its continued viability? Why do conservative models command such widespread approbation? These are the questions that have driven me to write this book. If this book challenges others to reflect on these problems, it will have accomplished its modest aim.

PART ONE

The Avant-Garde and its Discontents:
The Place of Poetry in Contemporary
Spanish Culture

CHAPTER ONE

Aesthetic Conservatism in Recent Spanish Poetry

It has become fashionable among younger Spanish poets to denigrate the avant-garde “excesses” of the previous generation, that of the *novísimos* who came of age in the late 1960s. According to poets such as Luis García Montero and Felipe Benítez Reyes, the “sacralization” of art characteristic of avant-garde poetics is no longer viable (García Montero, “Felipe Benítez Reyes” 11). The time has come for a more commonsensical conception of poetry, which is to be “un arte sensato” (a sensible art) capable of giving voice to experiences which are verisimilar to the common reader. Poetry should be, above all, “excelente literatura” (excellent literature) (Benítez Reyes, *Paraísos y mundos* 12). This sounds reasonable on its face: given a choice who would opt for extremity over moderation, delirium over common sense, bad literature over good? The short answer is “the modern poet.” The sensible position articulated by García Montero and Benítez Reyes is actually a striking departure in the context of a poetic tradition that has placed a premium on transgression and marginality. The great modern poets, from Rimbaud to Celan, have been those who stretch language to its limits in order to give voice to the experience of extremity. Poets working within this tradition would have had little or no interest in a poetry of normality and common sense. They would never have subscribed to recommendations like the following: “suele ser conveniente que el poema trate de experiencias comunes contadas en el lenguaje de una comunidad [...] La palabra lírica es útil [...] porque sabe hablar de la diferencia íntima y la capacidad de sentir que tienen las personas normales” (It is usually desirable for the poem to treat common experiences in the language of a community [...] The poetic word is useful because it can speak of the internal difference and capacity for feeling of normal individuals) (García Montero, “Felipe Benítez Reyes” 13).

In the pages that follow I propose an ideological and historical diagnosis of the new aesthetic conservatism in contemporary Spanish poetry. Essays by Luis García Montero and Felipe Benítez Reyes provide a convenient point of departure for this endeavor, since these two poets have articulated their reasons for rejecting avant-garde poetics with particular clarity and force. Both poets,

moreover, are highly regarded, prize-winning writers whose work reflects larger tendencies in Spanish poetry. An examination of the aesthetic and ideological implications of their prose statements can thus reveal a great deal about the state of Spanish poetry in the final decades of the twentieth century.

To characterize the rejection of avant-garde poetics as “conservative” is, seemingly, to disqualify it in advance. Yet there is no ideologically innocent word that would serve the same purpose. What is more, the intrinsically political nature of the debate makes it impossible to intervene in a neutral manner. García Montero’s condemnation of the avant-garde, for example, makes explicitly political claims.¹ It is also unfair to judge a poet’s poetic production by his or her essays. The case of Felipe Benítez Reyes is particularly complex, since his poetry manifests, to some degree, the stylistic excess that he condemns in his prose writings. At the very least, however, the conservative position that these poets espouse is a self-imposed constraint that limits the scope, although not always the quality, of their poetic achievement.

We can identify three aspects of avant-garde poetics which, in the opinion of García Montero and Benítez Reyes, have lost whatever viability they might have once possessed. The first is the idealization of social marginality, identified with the image of the poet as an individual fundamentally alienated from society. A second, related idea identifies poetic language with the transgression of established social and aesthetic norms of discourse. A third dimension of avant-garde poetics, perhaps the most important, is its programmatic ambitiousness, which often makes the poem as aesthetic object seem less important than the larger poetic project to which it contributes.²

Opposing the model of the *poète maudit* inherited from the late nineteenth century avant-garde, García Montero has proposed a model of the poet as a representative citizen whose concerns echo those of ordinary people. While this idea appears to be progressive, to the extent that it foresees a socially engaged role for the poet, it ultimately relies on a highly suspect category of “normality” that condemns all forms of social marginality. García Montero defends this concept in an essay entitled “Por qué no sirve para nada la poesía (observaciones en defensa de una poesía para seres normales).” His attempt to disavow the conservative implications of his own discourse is revealing:

Y quede claro que no utilizo el concepto de normalidad en un sentido regulador de matices y moralizador, una defensa de patrones estables y sistemas cerrados en sí mismos. Todo lo contrario, me refiero a la diferencia, la singularidad, la capacidad de sentir, los matices, la intensidad y el dinamismo de personas que no van vestidas de héroes ni hablan como profetas, personas que se consideran individuos normales y que no quieren refugiarse en la extravagancia. (*Por qué no es útil la literatura* 36)

(And let it be clear that I am not using the concept of normality in a way that regulates nuances or moralizes, [as a] a defense of stable patterns and self-enclosed systems. Just the opposite: I am referring to the difference, the singularity, the capacity for feeling, the nuances, the intensity and dynamism of people who neither go dressed up as heroes nor speak like prophets, people who consider themselves normal individuals with no desire to take refuge in extravagance.)

This disclaimer begs the question of where the boundary between *normality* and *extravagance* is to be located. The liberal tolerance that allows for small shades of difference (“matices”) within supposedly “normal” individuals has a decidedly exclusionary cast; García Montero’s protestations to the contrary, the concept of normality always, and by definition, entails a regulatory system that excludes the abnormal and the marginal.³

The implicit target of García Montero’s attack is the familiar conception of the poet as a heroic visionary capable of attaining a transcendent insight into reality. A prophetic poet in the mode of William Blake or a Rimbaudian visionary would not be “normal” in this sense. The concept of normality also rules out other possible roles for the poet: madman (or madwoman), social outcast, political revolutionary. Any difference from the norm (as opposed to a difference *within* it) becomes automatically suspect.⁴ This normative regulation of poetic subjectivity goes hand in hand with a suspicion of stylistic “extravagance.” Benítez Reyes, in a passage also quoted by García Montero in his introduction to the former’s work, claims that the only viable mode for the contemporary poet is the self-effacing conversational tone of polite society:

El poeta, desde luego, no puede permitirse en nuestros días muchas bravuras de tono, porque su pecado más ridículo puede ser la altisonancia, bien sea de inspiración verbal o emocional. Como tampoco puede permitirse quizá mucho alarde estilístico, a riesgo de ser tildado de titiritero. El poeta de nuestros días—a no ser que le traiga sin cuidado el pasar por ramplón o vocinglero—parece condenado a mantener una educada modulación de voz, sin destemplanzas, y a ejercer su técnica sin alardes, procurando que su invisibilidad no sea menor que su eficacia. Y, por encima de todo, que su poesía sea además—como tiene que serlo—excelente literatura. (*Paraísos y mundos* 44)

(The poet, of course, cannot in today’s world permit himself much bravado in tone, because his most ridiculous sin might be grandiloquence, whether of verbal or emotional inspiration. Just as he cannot permit himself much stylistic flourish, if he doesn’t want to be called a puppeteer. The poet of today—unless he does not care if he is called vulgar or loudmouthed—appears condemned to maintain a politely modulated voice, without harshness, and to exercise his craft without flourishes, procuring that his invisibility be at least as great as his efficacy. And above all, let his poetry be—as it needs to be—excellent literature.)

What is most striking in this passage is the overriding preoccupation with public opinion. The poet’s stylistic limitations are determined, not by any

artistic necessity, but by a fear of social ridicule! The derogatory language used to describe poetry that departs from a rather narrowly defined stylistic norm responds to a socially defined norm of polite behavior, so that the avant-garde poet is cast in the role of an unwelcome and boisterous party-guest. Once again, the stylistic range to which the poet is “condemned” is severely circumscribed by a fear of social marginality. The poet will only have a role to play within the social body if he or she remains within carefully delimited boundaries.

Needless to say, this stylistic self-restraint does not characterize twentieth-century literature in the avant-garde and modernist traditions. The desire to give voice to unspeakable experiences requires a rupture with the norms of social discourse. Such discourse could be understood as a form of “implicit censorship,” as Judith Butler has defined it in *Excitable Speech*:

Here the question is not whether certain kinds of speech uttered by a subject are censored, but how a certain operation of censorship determines who will be a subject depending on whether the speech of such a candidate for subject-hood obeys certain norms governing what is speakable and what is not. *To move outside the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject. To embody the norms that govern speakability is to consummate one's status as a subject of speech.* “Impossible speech” would be precisely the ramblings of the asocial, the rantings of the “psychotic” that the rules that govern the domain of speakability produce, and by which they are continually haunted. (133; original emphasis)

Benítez Reyes’s attempt to fix the boundary of legitimate poetic discourse is censorious in exactly this sense. The restriction he imposes is the exact analogue, on the stylistic level, of García Montero’s prohibition against “abnormal” subject positions.

The third aspect of the avant-garde that the younger Spanish poets reject is its overtly programmatic and theoretical character. Modern poets tend to view individual poems, not as aesthetic ends in themselves, but as contributions to larger poetic projects. The point is not to write good poetry (as good poetry has been traditionally defined) but to reform the language, to heal the rift between subject and object, or to foment an aesthetic revolution. It is in this sense that Benítez Reyes’s notion of “excellent literature,” while unobjectionable on its face, has undeniably reactionary implications. The phrase implies that we already know what excellent literature is, so that the poet’s task is to fulfill an already defined criterion of excellence. By this criterion, poetry which tests the limits of the genre, as it has been previously been defined, will predictably come up short. By the same token, conventionally well-crafted poems will appear to be excellent literature despite their manifest lack of aesthetic ambition. Ambition itself, from this perspective, is destined to incite ridicule:

Pero que a un poeta se considere a sí mismo un depositario y transmisor de conocimientos nunca vistos ni oídos, de fuegos sagrados y de abracadabras líricos,

es ya cosa de tomar a broma. Como a broma tomaríamos a un guardia municipal que se atribuyese el papel histórico de Napoleón. (*Paraísos y mundos* 30)

(But for a poet to consider himself a repository or transmitter of unseen and unheard knowledge, of sacred fires and lyrical abracadabras, is something we would take as a joke at this point. Just as we would take as a joke the municipal police officer who claimed for himself the historic importance of Napoleon.)

García Montero's astounding contention that avant-garde poets do not even like poetry reveals his attempt to limit the border of the genre:

Y es verdad que con frecuencia, cuando se mira al panorama inmediato, uno tiene la sensación de que hay mucho poeta al que no le gusta la poesía, poetas que se dedican a publicar versos porque no encuentran mejor forma de expresar sus ocurrencias teóricas o sus chistes, sus delirios y sus incapacidades de razonar. Suelen tener, además, un lenguaje áspero, con el brillo frío de las traducciones, sin esa flexibilidad cálida que les da a la palabras el uso público y colectivo de una lengua. Realmente muchas de las rupturas grandilocuentes, que suelen durar lo que un relámpago en el cielo, han sido capitaneadas por personas a las que simplemente no les gustaba la poesía, personas incapaces de conocer sentimentalmente eso que Lukács llamaba las leyes de un género. ("Felipe Benítez Reyes" 14-15)

(And the truth is that frequently, when one looks at the immediate scene, one has the feeling that there are many poets who don't like poetry, poets who devote themselves to publishing verse because they find no better form for expressing their theoretical surprises or their jokes, their deliriums and their failures to reason. They usually have, in addition, a harsh vocabulary, with the cold gleam of translation, lacking that warm flexibility that the collective and public use of language lends to words. Truly, many of the grandiloquent ruptures, which usually last as long as a flash of lightning in the sky, have been led by people who simply don't like poetry, people incapable of a sentimental relationship with what Lukács called the laws of a genre.)

Just who are these "many poets" with a distaste for poetry? There is only one movement in the recent literary history of Spain that answers to García Montero's "grandiloquent rupture": the so-called *novísimos* of the 1970s. Since it is impossible to fathom Pere Gimferrer or Guillermo Carnero, or any other prominent poet of this movement, disliking poetry, such a statement can only be understood as a rejection, on the part of García Montero, of any poetry that carries out a significant intellectual or aesthetic project at the expense of the ordinary reader's sentimental enjoyment of the text. Avant-garde movements in poetry, almost by definition, will produce work that will not appear "poetic" to contemporary readers. As Pierre Bourdieu explains it, in the context of French poetry:

the series of poetic revolutions against fully established poetry which has marked the history of French poetry since Romanticism tends to exclude from poetry all that makes up the "poetic": the more standard forms, the alexandrine, the sonnet, the poem itself—in short, the poetic "run-of-the-mill"; but also rhetorical figures,

comparisons, metaphors, or even predictable feelings, lyricism, effusion, and psychology. (*The Field of Cultural Production* 187–88)

When García Montero uses phrases like “el intelectualismo metálico” (metallic intellectualism) or “el formulador de doctrinas racionalistas en verso” (the formulator of rationalist doctrines in verse) (“Felipe Benítez Reyes” 15) he falls back on a complacent acceptance of this “poetic run-of-the-mill.”

The conservative view, as I understand it, emphasizes the constraints on human possibilities. There are natural limits to what humans can do—limits that just happen to coincide, in the conservative mind, with previously defined social norms. Those who attempt to break with these norms are accused of going against the inevitable order of things. The hostility toward the avant-garde among younger Spanish poets is conservative, then, in the precise sense that it posits a social norm—the poet is integrated into society, speaks to normal individuals in a plain style, and does not attempt to redefine the limits of the genre—and subjects any departure from this norm to the ultimate social sanctions of shame and ridicule.

According to García Montero, “estos poetas de la experiencia no critican la mirada vanguardista por gusto reaccionario” (These poets of experience do not criticize the avant-garde vision because they have reactionary taste) (“Felipe Benítez Reyes” 18). Such disclaimers beg the question of how a truly reactionary critique of the avant-garde would differ from his own. García Montero relies heavily on concepts like normality, common sense, and verisimilitude, condemning extremity, extravagance, and exaggeration at every turn. This binary opposition between normality and extravagance reflects the “bourgeois” mindset against which the avant-garde defined itself over one hundred years ago. García Montero, of course, argues that the avant-garde rebellion against this bourgeois ideology has run its course and become historically gratuitous. Even if we grant this point some validity, the alternative that he proposes—an ideological appeal to common sense and normality—is perhaps even less attractive.

While the conservative aesthetic might seem anomalous in the context of the avant-garde tradition of literary modernity, it does have identifiable roots in a particular branch of twentieth-century poetry. A distrust of aesthetic experimentation can be traced to the reaction against the avant-garde that arose in the 1930s in the work of poets like W. H. Auden. While Auden’s own work would have been inconceivable without the influence of modernists like T. S. Eliot, he forged a style, characterized by metrical traditionalism, intellectualized irony, and muted wit, that was in some sense an *anti*-modernism—if modernism is to be identified with aesthetic experimentalism. An Audenesque “academic poetry” became the dominant mode in American poetry in the 1940s and 1950s, overshadowing more experimental modes until the emergence of poets like Ginsberg, Ashbery, and O’Hara in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

It is revealing, then, that both Benítez Reyes and García Montero cite Auden as an important precursor of their own poetics (García Montero, “Felipe Benítez Reyes” 14–15). A more immediate model of aesthetic restraint is Jaime Gil de Biedma, an anglophile admirer of Auden whose influence on the younger Spanish poets has been extensive. While Gil de Biedma’s poetry is innovative within the context of postwar Spanish poetry, the roots of his poetics are in the culturally and aesthetically conservative branch of modern Anglo-American literature. What Gil de Biedma values most in the English-speaking tradition, indeed, is its social elegance and stylistic moderation:

Aún hoy en día, la literatura inglesa expresamente se produce en función de un contexto social definido—*the educated middle classes*—, sea para afirmarlo, modificarlo o condenarlo. De ahí su infalible justeza de tono, que también tuvo la prosa francesa en el XVIII: la relación que se establece con el lector es a la vez íntima y social. (*Diario de un poeta en 1956* 144)

(Still in the present day, English Literature is produced expressly in function of a definite social context—*the educated middle classes*—whether to affirm, modify, or condemn it. From this fact arises its infallible rightness of tone, which French prose of the eighteenth-century also possessed: the relation that it establishes with the reader is at once intimate and social.)

The conservative dimension of this posture lies in its subordination of both aesthetic and political concerns to the norm of social decorum; the writer is presumably free to condemn his or her own social milieu; yet this freedom is radically circumscribed by the overarching prohibition against questioning the legitimacy of the social discourse of the educated middle classes.

Gil de Biedma’s own poetry, along with that of other poets of the 1950s, provides the immediate model for the revival of the so-called “poetry of experience” in the 1980s. García Montero, for example, cites as precursors poets like “Blas de Otero, José Hierro, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Ángel González, José Manuel Caballero Bonald [and] Francisco Brines” (“Felipe Benítez Reyes” 14). Thus the period style of the 1980s derives directly from an aesthetic mode that had been fashionable thirty years earlier. (The *novísimos* who came to the fore in the 1970s, of course, had rejected this mode, despite their respect for poets like Brines, Gil de Biedma, Rodríguez, and Caballero Bonald.) The “poetry of experience” practiced by younger poets like García Montero, nevertheless, represents a somewhat muted version of the first wave of “poetry of experience.” The passionate political and existential anguish of Otero, the biting irony of Gil de Biedma, the baroque, self-deconstructing idiolect of Caballero Bonald, Brines’s metaphysical depth, and Rodríguez’s visionary mode, to mention only some fairly obvious examples, evince a stylistic diversity that is belied by a general rubric like “the poetry of experience.”

The risk inherent to García Montero’s poetics is not extravagance or

marginality, but lack of ambition. He is representative of what Dionisio Cañas has diagnosed as a general malaise in contemporary Spanish poetry, characterized simultaneously by technical competence and by an absence of innovation: “estamos viviendo el momento del siglo XX cargado de menos ambición estética en poesía por parte de los mismos creadores, y de una carencia absoluta de pasión y de intensidad” (we are living in the moment of the twentieth century least charged with aesthetic ambition in poetry on the part of the creators themselves, and of an absolute lack of passion and intensity) (132). García Montero is evidently a talented writer of verse, but his poetry aims to impress the reader in a deliberately restrained way, in keeping with his disdain for grandiloquence and intellectual pretension.⁵ It is difficult to single out passages in his work that are *particularly* unambitious in what they attempt to accomplish, since such a style, by definition, does not call attention to itself. With this caveat in mind, I offer the following verse-paragraph from *Diario cómplice*:

No es día 18.
Lo arrancamos por fin del calendario,
y esta lluvia, tranquila de verano,
se nos llena de un humo parecido
al cigarro que a veces nos gusta compartir,
para amarme despacio,
para seguir más tarde acariciándome. (61)

(Today isn't the 18th.
We finally ripped it from the calendar,
and this rain, tranquil in summer,
fills us with a smoke similar
to that of the cigarette that we sometimes like to share,
to love myself more slowly,
to continue, later, caressing myself.)

This is not egregiously bad writing; the simile of the cigarette smoke, for example, is quite effective in evoking the desired mood of idle tranquility. This is clearly the work of a poet with a close sentimental attachment to “the laws of a genre.” I would suggest only that this sort of poetry will not meet the demands of the “avant-garde reader,” that is, of the reader who has less modest expectations about what poetry should attempt to accomplish. García Montero’s work will inevitably seem flat and inconsequential when judged against that of more ambitious poets, even those who produce interesting failures. His low-key prosaic tone, moreover, will probably not have the effect of challenging the reader’s expectations, since this tone always remains just “lyrical” enough to remain within safe generic boundaries.

Since Gil de Biedma is an oft-cited model for García Montero, a comparison between the two poets might clarify the latter’s transformation of the “poetry of

experience” into a decidedly less ambitious mode. The conclusion of “Nocturno” echoes that of Gil de Biedma’s “Contra Jaime Gil de Biedma”:

¡Bienvenido
calor entre las sábanas,
conocida presencia en duermevela,
cuerpo de algunos días suficientes!
Por hoy me basta tu perfil
que se acomoda al mío
y el sueño deseable, mientras que turbiamente
pienso en la luna ebria
y en el hombre que encuentra al levantarse
olor frío a tabaco. (*Las flores del frío* 78)

(Welcome
warmth between the sheets,
a familiar presence in half-sleep,
the body of a few sufficient days!
For today your profile is enough for me,
accommodating itself to my own
and to desirable sleep, while I turbulently
think of the drunken moon
and the man who finds, waking up,
the cold smell of tobacco.)

A duras penas te llevaré a la cama
como quien va al infierno
para dormir contigo.
Muriendo a cada paso de impotencia,
tropezando con muebles
a tientas, cruzaremos el piso
torpemente abrazados, vacilando
de alcohol y de sollozos reprimidos.
Oh innoble servidumbre de amar seres humanos,
y la más innoble
que es amarse a sí mismo. (Gil de Biedma, *Las personas del verbo* 146)

(I’ll barely be able to carry you to bed
like someone going to hell
to sleep with you.
Dying of impotence at each step
bumping into furniture
blindly, we will cross the apartment
clumsily embracing, hesitating
with alcohol and repressed sobs.
Oh, what ignoble servitude to love human beings,
and the most ignoble
that of loving one’s self.)

Both poems depict a process of self-discovery through the shared motif of “going to bed with one’s self.” What for Gil de Biedma is a hellish proposition becomes, for García Montero, a motive for satisfaction and self-sufficiency, if not complacency. Gil de Biedma provides a stylistic model for García Montero’s nuanced exploration of what Debicki has called, in reference to another Montero poem, “a melancholic but low-keyed mood.” What is most strikingly missing in Montero’s treatment of this theme, however, is the idea that the examination of one’s own subjectivity is an arduous and even risky proposition. Smelling stale cigarette smoke in the morning after a night of debauchery is not pleasant, but it does not disturb the speaker’s fundamental sense of self. What is absent from García Montero’s revival of a “poetry of experience” is precisely the radical critique of the social order, and the poetic subject’s place in this order, that marks the best poetry of Gil de Biedma, Ángel González, and the early Valente.

It would appear that García Montero’s work is constrained not by any inherent lack of talent, but by the self-imposed limitations of a deliberately conservative aesthetic posture.⁶ Felipe Benítez Reyes’s relation to the tradition of modern poetics is a good deal more ambivalent. While his prose statements occasionally concur in a conservative anti-intellectualism, his actual poetic practice contradicts some of the basic tenets of the “poetry of experience” with which his generation has been associated.

To the extent that it focusses on subjective reactions to experiences, Benítez Reyes’s work superficially resembles that of García Montero. Benítez Reyes, however, rarely writes directly about “experience” per se; rather, he pits the value of an experience that lies, almost by definition, outside of the text, against the inherent falsity of artistic representations. The poem “La diferencia,” published in *Sombras particulares*, provides a succinct illustration of this dichotomy:

Tú dando a una metáfora
su sigiloso espectro de sentido.
Tú cuidando ese ritmo, la cadencia
de sombra de tu verso, y a su música
dejando confiada la memoria.

Tú afanado en un verso que te exprese,
tú entre la oscura luz.

Mientras afuera
la vida se destroza en su esplendor,
inocente y rotunda, y en nada parecida
a ningún ejercicio de elegía. (41)

(You giving to a metaphor
its surreptitious specter of sense.
You tending that rhythm, the cadence
of shadow in your verse, and to its music

leaving memory entrusted.

You, insistent that a verse express you,
you amid the dark light.

While outside
life is destroyed in its splendor,
innocent and rotund, and nothing similar
to any exercise of elegy.)

The notion of a “poetry of experience” is based on the premise that the poet can communicate his or her own lived experience to the reader in an accessible way; the theory of language underlying such a poetics, then, posits a transparent link between the signifier and the signified. Benítez Reyes, in contrast, refuses all confidence in the capacity of art to capture the essence of a lived experience. In “La diferencia,” the poet remain trapped within a purely artificial world, that of the text; despite his best efforts, he cannot express the tragic destruction of life’s splendor, a destruction that bears no resemblance to an “ejercicio de elegía.”

While such a text appears to privilege life over art, this privilege is paradoxical, since the reader is denied access to any experience outside the text. The subject of the poem is not “experience,” but writing itself. The implicit critique of the poet who is futilely polishing his style is equally paradoxical: Benítez Reyes’s own poem manifests a great attention to formal perfection, foregrounding poetic artifice to a great degree. One of the most striking features of Benítez Reyes’s poetry is its rather obvious “musicality”; his ostentatiously mellifluous use of verse forms has the effect of calling the reader’s attention to how well written his poetry is. (García Montero’s competent and unexceptional free verse, in contrast, does not call attention to itself.) His style, then, differs markedly from the self-effacing conversational style that is his ostensible ideal.

The stylistic excess in Benítez Reyes’s work does not suggest avant-garde rebelliousness, but rather a taste for the “conventionally poetic.” Since avant-garde poetry has tended to scorn poetic diction on principle, Benítez Reyes returns to late nineteenth-century movements like symbolism and *modernismo*. “Panteón familiar,” for example, is written in a language that is far removed both from ordinary speech and from the diction of most contemporary poetry:

Con un dedo en los labios un arcángel ordena
silencio al visitante que ha traído rosas.
¿Desde qué paraíso, desde qué oculto infierno
oleréis su fragancia funeral y simbólica?
Ya sé que lo hago en vano. ¿El reino de la nada
tiene dioses benévolos que anulan la memoria,
los recuerdos hirientes como un veneno lento?
Algún día lo sabré. ¿Y yo oleré las rosas

que alguien por cortesía extiende sobre el mármol
de luna helada y muerta?

Toda rosa es de sombra
y es fugaz, y se esparce, y es un mundo imperfecto
destinado a morir. ¿Pero queda su aroma
testimonial de vida y hermosura pasadas?
En ese mundo vuestro, ¿se reordena la forma
de la rosa deshecha? ¿Y yo oleré esa rosa? (*Poesía* 73).

(With a finger to the lips an archangel orders
silence to the visitor who has brought roses.
From what paradise, from what hidden hell
will you smell its funereal and symbolic fragrance?
I already know I'm doing it in vain. Does the realm of nothingness
have benevolent gods who annul the memory,
the memories that wound like a slow venom?
One day I shall know. And will I smell the roses
that someone for courtesy lays out on the marble
Of a frozen and dead moon?

Every rose is of shadow
and is fleeting, and is scattered, and is an imperfect world
destined to die. But does its aroma remain
a testimony to past life and beauty?
In that world of yours, is there a reordering
of the withered rose? And will I smell that rose?)

Through its self-conscious imitation of the versification and “literary” language of a previous period, this poem reflects upon the relation between the contemporary poet and the literary tradition. The ancestors that the speaker visits are, in my reading, literary precursors. The insistent questions he poses reveal an anxiety about Benítez Reyes’s own literary survival. The question behind his questions is whether his mastery of traditional poetic form will help him to enter the literary canon and thus transcend death.

The sort of literary aspiration inscribed in a poem like “Panteón familiar” is essentially nostalgic. The speaker takes comfort in his mastery of the stable literary values of a less turbulent period. Octavio Paz’s blurb for the back cover of *Sombras particulares* captures this attitude with great perspicacity: “es el libro de un nostálgico, de alguien que muestra nostalgia tanto por lo que ha vivido como por lo que no ha vivido, que es, creo, la manifestación de la melancolía en este final de siglo de las grandes innovaciones literarias y artísticas” (it is the book of a nostalgic man, of someone who reveals nostalgia both for what he has lived and for what he hasn’t lived, which [nostalgia] is, I believe, the manifestation of the melancholy of this end of a century of great literary and artistic innovations). Benítez Reyes’s nostalgia, however, is not for the great age

of avant-garde experimentation, but for the period immediately preceding it, when these innovations still lay in the future. His echoes of late nineteenth-century poetry evoke an era in which “Literature” appeared to be a realm of limitless possibilities. At the same time, Benítez Reyes has clearly lost faith in the promise of any literary utopia. His evocations of this ideal, therefore, are inevitably wistful and self-parodic.

Benítez Reyes’s *Vidas improbables* (*Improbable Lives*) (1995), winner of both the *Premio de la Crítica* and the *Premio Nacional de Literatura*, marks a departure, in at least one respect, from the conservative aesthetic. Following the example of Antonio Machado and Fernando Pessoa, the book contains the work of eleven apocryphal poets, one of whom, Rogelio Vega, is himself a literary forger. One of Vega’s forgeries is a poem purported to be by Álvaro de Campos, one of the *heterónimos* created by Fernando Pessoa. This complex metapoetic game would seem to suggest a renewed interest in literary experimentation; the invention of apocryphal poetic voices allows the poet to speak in a variety of poetic languages, some stylistically “extravagant,” socially marginal, or otherwise “abnormal.” The voices thus liberated in *Vidas improbables*, however, do not attain the same degree of autonomy as do those of Pessoa. Most are mere jokes, pretexts for the demonstration of the poet’s stylistic versatility rather than genuine explorations of alternative subject-positions. The poems of “La poetisa Amita Lo” (the poetess Amito Lo), for example, reflect a rather stereotypical idea of poetry written by women. Taken as a whole, then, *Vidas improbables* represents only a timid departure from the conservative ethos of Benítez Reyes’s poetry.⁷

One of Benítez Reyes’s improbable poets, interestingly enough, is “Pablo Arana, poeta de la experiencia.” The prose commentary on this apocryphal writer presents a decidedly negative vision of the trend with which García Montero, and to a lesser extent Benítez Reyes himself, have been identified:

Nacido en Madrid en 1965 y educado en la lejana Irlanda, Pablo Arana ejemplifica como pocos la presión que una tendencia dominante puede ejercer sobre los talentos en ciernes, desviándoles de la estética en que pudieran lograr su más plena realización y rendimiento. (75)

(Born in Madrid in 1965 and educated in faraway Ireland, Pablo Arana exemplifies as few others do the pressure that a dominant tendency can exert on incipient talents, diverting them from the aesthetic in which they might have accomplished their fullest realization and production.)

The commentary attributes Arana’s decision to write in this mode to opportunism, and concludes with the disclaimer that the editor has chosen the poems “en que menos se aprecia la corrupción llevada a cabo por el credo experiencial, esa meliflua estética de gente sin imaginación y sodomita” (in which the corruption produced by the experiential credo, that mellifluous aesthetic of people without imagination and Sodomites, is least evident) (76).

This commentary can be taken ironically; the nasty homophobic reference is a particularly blatant clue, given Benítez Reyes's manifest admiration for gay poets such as Auden, Cernuda, Gil de Biedma, and Brines. Still, the demonstration that the poetry of experience is susceptible to parodic treatment, just like any other style, suggests that Benítez Reyes may be distancing himself from the experiential mode: Arana's poems, in my estimation at least, are deliberately and painfully inept.

Unlike his friend García Montero, Benítez Reyes does not propose a "poetry for normal people," but rather a deliberately artificial literary universe in which no poetic idiom, not even his own, can be taken seriously. His disdain for the avant-garde is directed, not at the techniques of avant-garde poetry, but at the pretensions of a literary aesthetic that claims to be anything more than a pleasant diversion.

At the end of a century characterized by ambitious aesthetic projects, the move to limit poetry to the expression of private sensibility appears particularly limiting. To condemn poetic projects that are aesthetically or intellectually ambitious, on the grounds that they will seem extravagant in the context of contemporary society, is to limit the potential of the genre in advance. One important motivation behind the return of "experience" is, undoubtedly, the perceived marginalization of poetry within contemporary culture. García Montero's plea for a poetry for normal people is an attempt to reach an otherwise unengaged audience; Benítez Reyes's fear of ridicule, likewise, is motivated by a concern with the poet's social profile. Yet insofar as poetry continues to have any readers at all, such readers are likely to look to poetry for things that they cannot find elsewhere, namely, the visionary states of consciousness, the transgression of social norms, and the self-conscious exploration of language that have characterized the best avant-garde poetry of the century.

While the aesthetic conservatism identified with the revival of "la poesía de la experiencia" is, perhaps, the dominant force among one particularly well-known group of younger Spanish poets, modernist and avant-garde ideals have not lost their power of seduction. Chapter 2 will attempt to reframe the conflictive relation between the modernist/avant-garde tradition and the "poetry of experience" by looking at three contemporary "Apologies for Poetry." Chapter 3, in turn, will examine the cultural and political implications of the perceived domination of the experiential school.

Notes

- 1 For example, he associates avant-garde poetics with Hitler and Stalin, proposing his own version of the “poetry of experience,” by implication at least, as the political equivalent of Spain’s liberal democracy (“Felipe Benítez Reyes” 12).
- 2 My working definition of the “avant-garde” does not differ substantially from that of García Montero. The avant-garde project is not limited to the historical avant-garde of the teens and twenties, but encompasses innovative poetic movements from the late nineteenth century through postmodernism.
- 3 Eduardo Subirats has astutely unpacked the political implications of the term “normalización” in contemporary Spain: “La palabra, o más bien el eufemismo, que en la jerga del discurso político institucional designa este proceso de progresiva parálisis, empobrecimiento y desencanto a lo largo de los ochenta ha sido la ‘normalización.’ Después del cambio y de la modernidad o modernización, este eslogan de normalizar o normalizarse fue adquiriendo progresiva notoriedad. Significaba de manera más o menos opaca o sibilina que, tras los años de juventud y de euforia, ciertamente breves, de la democracia española y sus variadas esperanzas en lo cultural como en lo político, había que adaptarse a las mismas circunstancias de ‘siempre,’ o sea, implícitamente a la grisalla cotidiana de los años del franquismo” (*Después de la lluvia* 99–100).
- 4 In *Poesía, cuartel de invierno*, an interesting historical critique of the idea of the poet as social outsider, García Montero revindicates the figure of Campoamor, a poet whose deliberately prosaic style appealed to a middle-brow nineteenth-century public.
- 5 *Además* collects three books that depart from García Montero’s central poetic project: *Y ahora eres dueño del puente de Brooklyn* (1980), *En pie de paz* (1985) y *Rimado de ciudad* (1981–1992), nacieron al margen de la evolución normal de mi poesía” (13). These works manifest a great stylistic *élan*. Their marginal position within the poet’s opus, nevertheless, speaks for itself. It could be argued that ludic works like García Montero’s *Rimado de ciudad*, Benítez Reyes’s *Vidas improbables*, or Amparo Amorós’s *Quevediana* do not pose a fundamental challenge to the conservative aesthetic; rather, their manifest lack of “seriousness” serves to reinforce the boundary between serious and non-serious genres of poetry.
- 6 Debicki and Villena offer more positive views of García Montero. The former points to his stylistic variety and to the complexity of his subjective effects (203–05). His attempt to apologize for the conservatism of García Montero and other poets of the 1980s understates the ideological animus against avant-garde poetics: “When the new poets of the 1980s did not stress linguistic creativity as much as their predecessors had done, they were not erasing a prior trend but merely recognizing, consciously or unconsciously, that the battle for creativity had been won and did not need to be repeated” (181). Villena sees García Montero as the representative poet of his generation: “La poesía de Luis García Montero—un tiempo el más cercano al tono de Gil de Biedma—es quizá la que cumple más rigurosamente y al fin con más personalidad, los postulados de una renovada poética de la experiencia” (*Fin de siglo* 25).
- 7 For a negative view of *Vidas improbables*, and of Benítez Reyes’s poetic work in its entirety, see Salustiano Martín’s review of *Paraísos y mundos*: “Han premiado la vieja técnica que se domina, la ausencia de riesgo, los juegos sin pasión, la suave ironía de la falta de sustancia, la elusión del compromiso con el aquí y el ahora que el poeta y sus presuntos lectores tienen que sobrevivir” (40).

CHAPTER TWO

Three Apologies for Poetry

The place of poetry within the cultural context in which it is produced and consumed is a particularly vexing question for contemporary poets and critics in Spain. How and why does poetry matter? What is its standing among the myriad discourses of postmodernity? The most readily available answer to this question, of course, is that the genre has lost whatever larger significance it once possessed: aside from the poets themselves and a few academic specialists, the familiar argument runs, poetry has scant resonance with the public. The emerging field of Hispanic Cultural Studies grants only minimal importance to poetry, a genre still heavily identified with the values that have shaped the *literary* canon: no contemporary poets are mentioned in Graham and Labanyi's *Spanish Cultural Studies*, except in Chris Perriam's survey of gay and lesbian culture. Within literary criticism, on the other hand, poetry is often regarded as a minor genre that began to wane in significance after the glory days of the generation of 1927. Even truly exceptional Spanish poets often appear to be minor figures when compared to even moderately successful novelists.

Even if we accept this pessimistic view, however, the specific claims made on behalf of poetry in contemporary Spain are highly revealing, providing clues about the status of literature as a whole. In the pages that follow I propose to examine the three principal arguments that have guided discussions of poetry in the past fifteen years, with an eye to answering the fundamental question of how poetry can still make a viable claim on the cultural imagination. The division of recent Spanish poetry into three main currents is reasonably well-established: there is an "essentialist" or metaphysical poetry, a "poetry of experience," and a neo-avant-garde poetry of "difference."¹ What I propose to examine here are the issues underlying this three-way split. Each of the main tendencies speaks to a different readership and envisions a markedly different cultural role for poetry. All, however, can be understood as reactions to the "marginal" status of the genre in the closing years of the millennium.

For the first group of poets, poetry does not require any external justification; its value does not depend on the number of readers it attracts.² This attitude,

most clearly exemplified by José Ángel Valente, is rooted in the assumptions of literary modernism. While the school of poetry inspired by Valente is usually termed “essentialist” or “metaphysical,” I prefer the more inclusive term “late modernist.” Valente’s recent collection of aphorisms, *Notas de un simulador*, makes constant reference to the icons of the modern literary tradition, from Friedrich Hölderlin to Juan Ramón Jiménez, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, José Lezama Lima, and Edmond Jabès. He quotes Joyce’s definition of the “epiphany” with unqualified approval, as well as the trilogy of aesthetic principles, from St. Thomas Aquinas, that Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus expounds in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “Las tres cualidades de la obra literaria según Sto. Tomás: *integritas* (unidad, totalidad), *consonantia* (coherencia, ‘decorum’), *claritas* (capacidad de iluminación de la palabra)” (The three qualities of the literary work according to St. Thomas: *integritas* (unity, totality), *consonantia* (coherence, ‘decorum’), *claritas* (the capacity for illumination in the word) (27).

For a poet working within this modernist paradigm, the relationship between literature and history is necessarily oblique:

En el diario de Kafka las líneas dedicadas a la primera guerra mundial no pasan de cincuenta. Pocas semanas después del comienzo de la guerra sus preocupaciones son la escritura de “La colonia penitenciaria” y el comienzo de *El proceso*.

Durante la guerra, Joyce está entregado a la escritura de la primera parte de *Ulises*.

El tiempo del escritor no es el tiempo de la historia. Aunque el escritor, como toda persona, pueda ser triturado por ella. (34)

(In Kafka’s diary the lines about the First World War number less than fifty. A few weeks after the start of the war his preoccupations are the writing of “The Penal Colony” and the beginning of *The Trial*.)

During the war, Joyce dedicates himself to writing of the first part of *Ulysses*.

The time of the writer is not the time of history. Although the writer, like anyone else, can be mangled by it.)

Valente participated in the debates surrounding the social utility of poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, and his own poetry continues to make occasional references to historical events. His argument is not for “art-for-art’s-sake,” but for an even more exalted conception of the poet’s cultural role, one based, implicitly, on his confidence in the superiority of the artist’s vision of reality. He consciously models himself after the late-modernist poet Paul Celan, whose holocaust poems are notoriously hermetic. The model of cultural significance implicit in his poetic theory and practice remains an elite one. Valente makes no concessions to the literary marketplace. If he ultimately makes an impact on the larger culture, it will be in the same uncompromising way that Kafka or Beckett have.

The idea of the autonomy of literary value is *residual* in contemporary

culture.³ Respected poets like Valente continue to enjoy a high level of prestige; the idea of the “great poet” still resonates with the public that reads the culture section of *El país* or *ABC* and is curious about which contemporary writer will be elected to the *real academia*. The size of this audience is relatively small. Valente often published new collections of poetry in small, expensive editions, although editions of his collected poems and *antologías poéticas* still come out with some frequency. For the modernist paradigm, of course, contemporary readership is not the real issue: a significant work, while read by a minuscule group of initiates at the time of its first publication, will eventually reach a substantial audience. This paradigm continues to show signs of life even at the end of the century: cheap, mass-market editions of Rimbaud, Kafka, Beckett, Pessoa, Lorca, Alberti, and even Gimferrer are available in bookstores and newstands in Spanish cities. Valente’s own poetry remains available in a wide variety of formats, ranging from critical editions to pocket anthologies. Along with his contemporaries Claudio Rodríguez and Francisco Brines, he is likely to remain a part of the literary canon for at least the immediate future. The question, however, is whether this canon itself has lost its centrality in an age in which the educational system is becoming increasingly reluctant to assert the value of “great literature.”

If the High-Modernist model is *residual*, as prestigious as it is outmoded, there is another school of poetry in contemporary Spain that has defined itself, rather self-consciously, as *dominant*. Since the early 1980s, proponents of “la poesía de la experiencia” have exercised a sort of literary hegemony, often characterizing other aesthetic options as outdated, misguided, and lacking in literary quality. Anthologies of recent Spanish poetry, especially those edited by Luis Antonio de Villena and José Luis García Martín, give pride of place to this tendency, often to the exclusion of other modes.⁴ Luis García Montero, a prolific and persuasive essayist and poet, is the de facto leader of this dominant group, which is comprised primarily of male poets born after 1955 or so.⁵ Other prominent poets in this category are Felipe Benítez Reyes and Carlos Marzal.

The poets of “experience” reject modernist or avant-garde principles; instead, they propose a “normalization” of poetry that would make it more palatable to the ordinary reader. The immediate model for this renewal of contact with the reader is the poetry of the 1950s, including Ángel González, Jaime Gil de Biedma, and perhaps the *early* Valente. The phrase that has given this school its name derives from Robert Langbaum’s study of the dramatic monologue in English poetry, *The Poetry of Experience*, which Gil de Biedma read in the 1950s. Generally speaking, the values to which the dominant poets of the 1980s and 1990s appeal are those of literary realism. García Montero has revived the concept of verisimilitude, while García Martín has coined the phrase “poesía figurativa,” making an analogy with figurative (i.e. non-abstract) painting. These poets also

like to appeal to the use-value of poetry for the ordinary person; their poetry aims to be engaging, accessible, finely crafted, and relevant to everyday life.

This poetry, then, aims to reach the well-educated public that nevertheless feels relatively alienated from the late modernist aesthetic championed by José Ángel Valente. Unlike the social poetry of the 1950s, however, “the poetry of experience” is not populist; there is no talk here of Blas de Otero’s immense majority. The appeal, rather, is to a cultivated, but not excessively high-brow, middle class. There is often a conservative tone in García Montero’s rejection of the avant-garde, although he might bristle at this characterization. As outlined in Chapter 1, he proposes a “normalization” of poetry, on the analogy of the normalization of Spanish society in the transition to democracy after the death of Franco.⁶ Hence, the role he envisions for the poet is that of a well-adjusted citizen speaking to similarly situated subjects.

García Montero’s solution to the problem of audience has been successful on its own terms. A prolific poet, he has many books in print, and his numerous imitators dominate the anthologies, fostering a small but far from negligible audience for this sort of poetry. The fatal flaw with the poetry of experience, however, is a certain ideological and aesthetic restrictiveness, masked by an appeal to the common sense of the “ordinary reader.” García Montero’s ridicule of avant-garde poetics and of alternative subject-positions has the effect of limiting the sphere in which poetry can operate. We might wonder about a literary climate in which a poem like José Luis Rendueles’s “Vindicación del desencanto” (A Vindication of Disenchantment) is considered worthy of anthologizing. The speaker of this poem recounts the course of a love affair in fairly banal language. Here is a representative verse-paragraph:

A la etapa de la charla interminable,
de los besos por cualquier excusa tonta,
siguió la de la camaradería silenciosa.
Sin habernos dado cuenta
habíamos cambiado el romanticismo
por el hábito, pero no era algo tan malo
después de todo

¿no crees? (Villena, *10 menos 30* 206)

(After the stage of interminable talk,
of kisses for any silly excuse,
there followed that of silent camaraderie.
Without having realized it
we had exchanged Romanticism
for habit, but it wasn’t anything that bad
in the end,

don’t you think?)

Ironically, this poem appears in an anthology that purports to demonstrate how younger poets (ten poets under the age of thirty) go *beyond* the precepts of the poetry of experience, which, by the mid-1990s, had exhausted its limited resources. This poem, obviously, does not mount a serious challenge to the realist aesthetic: its title, in fact, implies a half-hearted acceptance of the world-weary cultural mood commonly labeled “el desencanto.” Luis Antonio Villena, who selected “Vindicación del desencanto” for this anthology, asserts that younger poets have grown restless with the narrow restrictions of the dominant school. This observation may be accurate, but it still falsely assumes that this deliberately subdued poetic realism is the only game in town. In any case, a large number of the poems selected in *10 menos 30* fail to signal any clear advance over the “dominant tendency” of the 1980s, despite the subtitle of the anthology: “la ruptura interior en la ‘poesía de la experiencia’” (the interior rupture in “the poetry of experience”).

The most obvious problem with the revival of realist or “figurative” poetry, then, is that it offers very little to the hard-core reader of poetry, who typically demands some combination of highly charged language, expressive intensity, and intellectual stimulation. It might appeal more to readers of prose fiction, who are sometimes content with a fairly ordinary plot recounted in an unexceptional prose style. García Montero’s poetry, then, fills a precise niche: it is a poetry that can be consumed without undue exertion by an audience accustomed to the finely crafted novels of Antonio Muñoz Molina and Javier Marías. Since poetry remains a residually prestigious genre, there is a need for an upper-middle-brow poet who reflects the cultural aspirations of a certain sector of society. It is in this context that Raquel Medina has spoken of “la conversión de la poesía en un artículo de consumo para la clase política y la burguesía” (the conversion of poetry into an article of consumption for the political and the bourgeois classes) (603). This astute sociological observation nicely accounts for García Montero’s centrist appeal, which is difficult to explain in either late modernist or populist terms.⁷

Another problem with the poetry of experience is its desire to position itself as the central current of contemporary Spanish poetry. Proponents of this sort of writing use words like *dominant* and *hegemonic*, usually without a trace of irony (Villena, *10 menos 30* 12; García Martín, *Selección nacional* 10). Proponents of the concept of a “dominant tendency,” it is true, are quick to disavow the negative implications of this formulation, characterizing this dominance as a natural development of the genre rather than as a pernicious conspiracy to exclude other poetic options.⁸ Luis Antonio de Villena, for example, is relatively nuanced in his assessment of recent Spanish poetry, giving at least minimal credit to alternative tendencies. Still, he is far too invested in the notion of *success*:

Lo que para mí quedaba claro, en el verano de 1992—cuando realicé la antología—, era que entre todos los tonos de la generación del 80, la llamada *poesía de la experiencia* se había convertido en el más transitado, el más aplaudido, el más seguido, el más denostado—clara señal del éxito—y en el que estaban algunos, bastantes, de los poetas clave del momento.

What was clear to me in the summer of 1992, when I did the anthology [*Fin de siglo*], was that among all the tones of the generation of 1980, the so-called *poetry of experience* had become the most well-travelled, the most applauded, the most followed, the most attacked (a clear sign of success) and within it were working some, quite a few, of the key poets of the moment. (*10 menos 30* 15)

By the same logic, poets who depart from this dominant tendency, are inexorably associated with *failure*:

Este heteroclítico grupo final – autodenominado de la diferencia – está compuesto por poetas de varia edad y condición, cuyo único nexo unitivo es el fracaso, la conciencia de su falta de éxito. Explicable en unos por una clara ausencia de calidad y en otros – de mucho mejor página – por un nítido desfase histórico...

This final, heterogeneous group, self-denominated as the poetry of *difference*, is composed of poets of varying age and condition, whose only unifying link is failure, the consciousness of a lack of success. Explainable in some by a clear lack of quality and in others—much better writers—by a clear-cut historical anachronism... (*10 menos 30* 11)⁹

The reasoning here is circular: poets fail because they don't write well or are out of step with the times. The failure of any poet working outside the "dominant" tendency is virtually tautological: nothing fails like failure.

This poetry of "difference" is the third main current in recent Spanish poetry. If high modernism is *residual* and the "poetry of experience" is culturally *dominant*, this final tendency is perhaps *emergent*. It consists of an amorphous group of poets whose common denominator is not their lack of success, as Villena would have it, but their explicit rejection of the all-too-successful experiential mode. It is the hegemony of the dominant school, in fact, that lends this poetry much of its oppositional force. Without such a well-defined and self-confident orthodoxy, in other words, the *difference* of this group might be more difficult to discern.

No single figure stands out as the most representative poet of this heterogeneous category. Most of the women writing today belong to it almost by default, since they are largely absent from the "dominant" anthologies edited by the two most prolific anthologists of the moment: Villena and García Martín. (None of these anthologies includes more than two women; Villena's *10 menos 30* is exclusively male.) By the same token, anthologies of women poets, like Buenaventura's *Las Diosas Blancas* and Benegas and Munárriz's *Ellas tienen la palabra*, tend to promote a self-consciously avant-garde or alternative agenda, even though

some of the women poets included in them are closer to either residual high modernism or to the mainstream poetry of experience. Beginning in the early 1980s, a whole generation of younger women were inspired by the examples of Ana Rossetti and Blanca Andreu. Isla Correyero, herself one of the strongest of these poets, has recently edited a compilation entitled *Feroces: radicales, marginales y heterodoxos en la última poesía española*. “Difference,” as I am using the term here, is not a unitary school of poetry, but a blanket label covering explicitly political poets, like Jorge Riechmann, poets who represent extreme or marginal subjectivities, like Leopoldo María Panero, and poets who consider themselves to be linguistically innovative or avant-garde.

The division between “difference” and “experience” is not an absolute one. Many poets are justifiably wary of such labels and categories; some could be included in either grouping, depending on how and where the line is drawn. Esperanza López Parada is included in both the orthodox *Fin de siglo* (the only woman in this anthology!) and in Antonio Ortega’s heterodox *La prueba del nueve*. Yet the dividing line is not entirely artificial: at stake, once again, is the crucial matter of poetry’s cultural aspirations. In this respect the poetry of difference, *pace* Villena, has also found its core audience. Blanca Andreu’s *De una niña de provincias que se vino a vivir en un Chagall* was a publishing success, as were *Las Diosas Blancas* and *Ellas tienen la palabra*. Correyero’s *Feroces* has also made a significant impact. One of the regular book reviewers for the widely circulated monthly *Reseña*, Salustiano Martín, has championed alternatives to the dominant “poetry of experience” regularly throughout the 1990s, often castigating anthologies that limit themselves to this hegemonic school.

The appeal of a self-consciously “marginal” poetry is not difficult to explain. A significant segment of the reading public is not likely to respond well to a poetry that promotes itself as socially normative and hegemonic. This category would include politically active *progres*, younger people generally, and women readers alienated by a literary establishment that still arrogantly perpetuates male privilege. For members of this group, the marginality of poetry, its status as a minor genre, resonates with their own sense of standing outside the dominant currents of power. Some of the poetry of “difference” continues to draw from modernist and late modernist models, like the poetry of Antonio Gamoneda and José Ángel Valente. Other poets speak more directly to a generation more attuned to alternative rock than to classic literature. Ironically, “alternative” or “counter-cultural” movements often have more in common with residual literary modernism than they do with the mainstream culture of the cultivated middle class. The neo-avant-garde poetry of *difference* tends to reject, however, the Olympian viewpoint of high modernism. More engaged in the here and now, it does not seek vindication from posterity.

These, then, are three easily discernible “apologies for poetry” in contem-

porary Spain. Each addresses and, indeed, *defines* a particular segment of the reading public. The total size of the audience for poetry remains small relative to the population as a whole; hence the surprise when a book of poetry begins to resonate with more than a thousand readers or so. Still, the divisions within this already small group are telling, mirroring larger societal attitudes toward literary culture. In general, readers of literature tend to fall into the three categories outlined above. Members of the literary elite, the smallest group, justify their preferences in terms of literary autonomy, with deliberate disregard for the marketplace. “Middle-brow” readers prefer lighter, less demanding fare, but still seek some degree of intellectual stimulation and cultural prestige. Because this group is more numerous than the first, it has the power to determine which books will be best-sellers and which literary tendencies will be perceived as “dominant” at any given moment. Finally, young, marginal, or progressive readers favor literature that reflects their own “alternative” sensibility.¹⁰

These categories of readers are somewhat speculative. I have based my categories on anecdotal evidence and on the virtual reading-subjects interpellated in each of the three “apologies for poetry.” It is possible that a closer look at actual readership would modify my conclusions.¹¹ All the same, my categories are not only plausible but virtually tautological: readers will inevitably prefer works that interpellate them as the sort of readers they aspire to be. Thus the rhetorical mode of the text itself is a fairly good predictor of both its intended and its real audience. On the other hand, it could be that the *entire* audience for poetry is a relatively elite one, and that the debate over literary value takes place largely among warring factions of a small literary tribe. That poets belonging to the three major tendencies often publish their books with the same publishers (especially Visor and Hiperión) might indicate that the audience for poetry is less divided than I have indicated. In this scenario, elite readers identify with the particular “apology for poetry” that they find most congenial. A professor of literature might read García Montero’s poetry and identify with its interpellation of the “ordinary citizen,” even though he or she possesses a great deal more cultural capital than the implicit reader. This process is analogous to Blas de Otero’s simultaneous address to a virtual “*inmensa mayoría*” and to a real readership comprised largely of leftist intellectuals.

Even if the entire audience for poetry is an elite one—a debatable proposition—the divisions within this audience will still reflect differences of age, gender, status, and ideology. The poetry world would thus be a microcosm of the culture as a whole, a relatively self-contained *mundillo literario* that exemplifies larger cultural currents on a smaller scale. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the literary field provides a useful model for analyzing this situation:

The literary field (one may also speak of the artistic field, the philosophical field, etc.) is an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its

specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated, and so forth. Put another way, to speak of a “field” is to recall that literary works are produced in a particular social universe endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws. And yet this observation runs counter both to the tradition of internal reading, which considers works in themselves independently from historical conditions in which they were produced, and the tradition of external explication, which one normally associates with sociology and which relates the works directly to the economic and social conditions of the moment. (*The Field of Cultural Production* 163)

The independence of the literary field does not mean that it functions without reference to other spheres. Rather, this field acts “somewhat like a prism which *refracts* every external determination: demographic, economic, or political events are always retranslated according to the specific logic of the field, and it is by this intermediary that they act on the logic of the development of works” (Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* 164; original emphasis).¹²

The seemingly intractable question of literary “quality” often emerges in discussions of contemporary literature. One common way of conceptualizing this problem is to appeal to the private “taste” of individuals. If taste were a *personal* matter, however, it would be impossible to explain how *any* cultural product could appeal to more than a handful of people whose preferences happened to coincide. Much of the disparity in the assessment of *quality* in recent Spanish poetry is attributable, not to individual differences among readers, but to the social and cultural divisions outlined above. The modernist criterion of literary value is perhaps the easiest to define, since it has dominated the process of canon-formation for quite some time: José Ángel Valente and Pere Gimferrer have been successful according to the same criteria that have made Juan Ramón Jiménez or Jorge Guillén canonical poets. The poets of “experience” deploy the notion of literary quality in a discernibly different way. Although they still invoke canonical literary values to some extent, in order to claim for themselves the prestige traditionally associated with poetry, they also explicitly link quality to success with a particular segment of the literary marketplace. This poetry often appears well-written, when judged by conventional standards, though it may seem *merely* conventional to readers who prefer either high modernist or alternative options. From a perspective outside the dominant one, then, the poetry that has the most invested in conventional ideas of quality can easily appear to be the least stimulating.

The poetry of *diferencia* is least likely to wrap itself up in the mantle of “quality,” since it owes the least to conventional standards of literary value. This very independence, however, lends it a vitality that is sometimes absent from the ostensibly “well-written” poetry of the other two tendencies. Too narrow a definition of quality, evidently, is a hindrance to poetic innovation, since quality is usually defined with reference to already established literary models.

Judged by conventional standards, many of the poems collected in Correyero's *Feroces* may seem deficient. Yet it is precisely these standards that this vibrant anthology calls into question. Once again, the poetry of difference has more in common with the late modernist model than it does with the centrist poetry of "experience." Modernism, though now often perceived as the repository of conservative literary values, is rooted in vanguard movements of past decades. It thus shares more with the contemporary avant-garde than it does with the self-consciously mainstream sensibility of the dominant school. The "élitism" of the residual poetry of modernism is structurally similar to the "marginality" of the contemporary avant-garde: in both cases, value is attributed to poetic practices that diverge from middle-of-the-road taste.

It should be obvious at this point that the author of this book is not a neutral observer of the debate surrounding literary value in contemporary Spanish poetry. It is difficult even to find an objective vocabulary with which to describe this debate, since words like "élite" and "middle-brow" are fraught with negative connotations. As a reader accustomed to difficult modern poetry, in any case, I prefer both residual modernism and the emergent neo-avant-garde to the dominant "poetry of experience." While sympathetic to Valente's intransigent opposition to the marketplace, I welcome the diversity of voices presented in *Ellas tienen la palabra* and *Feroces*. (I also admire Felipe Benítez Reyes, despite my antipathy to his *professed* poetics.) This "exclusion of the middle" is actually quite widespread among academic readers, who disdain middle-brow culture much more than they do the products of mass entertainment.¹³ This logic perhaps accounts for the gap between proponents and critics of the poetry of experience. It is not surprising that traditional humanists loyal to the modernist canon join hands with young avant-garde poets to reject the revival of a normative literary realism:

La esfera de lo que llamamos *real* o *realidad* suele quedar acotada por lo que somos capaces de imaginar en un momento dado. La realidad y sus realismos suelen ser el fruto de una imaginación impotente, no capaz de imaginar otra cosa. (Valente, *Notas de un simulador* 27)

(The sphere of what we called *real* or *reality* is usually limited by what we are capable of imagining in a given moment. Reality and its realisms are usually the result of an impotent imagination, incapable of imagining anything else.)

* * *

Many scholarly studies on contemporary Spanish poetry consist of a series of textual analyses framed by background information on the poet(s) studied and by a theoretical approach. My description of the cultural field of Spanish poetry obviously departs from this model; yet some concrete examples are necessary to demonstrate the ways in which contemporary poetry dramatizes the issue of

poetry's cultural viability. In order to maintain some degree of even-handedness, I have chosen texts from three poets who might be judged among the "best" in each category. An untitled prose-poem by José Ángel Valente is the first exhibit:

EJERCEMOS UN ARTE mínima, pobre, no vendible, salvo en contadas ocasiones, nunca públicas, igual que ésta, aquí, en la tarde, en la hora incierta de la absoluta desaparición. (Valente, *No amanece el cantor* 99)

(THE ART WE PRACTICE is minimal, poor, unmarketable, save on limited occasions, never public, like this one, here, this afternoon, at the indefinable hour of absolute disappearance.)

Valente emphasizes poetry's residual status: poetry is a threatened art, on the verge of extinction because of its lack of market value and public utility. Presumably, however, this precarious status is a mark of distinction, since it lends poetry its exceptional status. Valente's minimalism conceals his confidence in the privileged status of poetic language.

Felipe Benítez Reyes's "Apunte" (Note) is a skillful poem written in the dominant style:

Esos barcos que llegan sigilosos al muelle
 tienen algo de símbolo y de fácil metáfora.
 El símbolo quizá de lo que muere.
 La metáfora, en fin, de una vida ignorada.

De niño los miraba inventando unas rutas
 por olvidados mares y por tierras de magos.
 Perdiéndose en la niebla, helados por la luna,
 los barcos de mi infancia iban siempre de paso.

Perseguían un mundo que no existe. Un mundo
 que ha muerto en mí, que está borrándose
 al evocarlo ahora desde este mar oscuro
 que sólo surcan ya los barcos fantasmales. (*Sombras particulares* 30)

(Those ships that silently slip into the docks
 have something of the symbol or the facile metaphor.
 The symbol, perhaps, of all that dies,
 The metaphor, finally, of an unknown life.

As a child I looked at them inventing routes
 through forgotten seas and lands of wizards.
 Fading in the mist, frozen by the moon,
 the ships of my childhood were always just passing by.

They were searching for a world that doesn't exist. A world
 that has died in me, that is wiped away
 as I evoke it now from this dark sea
 that is crossed now only by phantasmal ships.)

This poem can be paraphrased thus: “I had stereotypically ‘literary’ aspirations in my youth, but I have put aside childish things. Nevertheless, my reputation as a poet rests on my skill at manipulating easily recognizable metaphors.” (As if distrusting his readers’ literary competence, however, he explains the significance of these metaphors!) In keeping with this message, Benítez Reyes’s sing-song *alejandrinos* contrast with Valente’s spare prose-rhythms.

Finally, a dated entry from Isla Correyero’s 1996 *Diario de una enfermera* can represent the poetry of “difference”:

29 de septiembre de 1994
 Hemos actuado precipitadamente.
 No hemos esperado el tiempo necesario para comprobar si verdaderamente estaba muerto.
 Le hemos amortajado entre algodón y bromas y hemos sellado sus ojos con el “Nobecutane”.
 Creímos ver un músculo facial que se movía...
 Nada.
 Trabajamos nerviosos, alegres.
 Falta muy poco para irnos a casa. (Benegas, ed. *Ellas tienen la palabra* 309)

(September 29, 1994
 We’ve acted hastily.
 We didn’t wait the time necessary to confirm that he was really dead.
 We shrouded him in cotton and jokes and sealed his eyes with “Nobecutane.”
 We thought we saw his face move.
 Naah.
 We work nervously, gaily.
 There’s very little time left before we go home.)

Isla Correyero’s nurse speaks with a different tone: the cadaver (the literary tradition itself?) may or may not be completely dead, but who cares? The speaker’s concerns are elsewhere. While this meta-poetic reading finds no direct justification in the text (there is nothing to link the supposedly dead man with poetry or literature), the rejection of elegy reveals a decidedly less respectful attitude toward the past.¹⁴ In contrast both to Valente’s solemn elegiac mode and Benítez Reyes’s self-deprecating but still self-absorbed nostalgia, Correyero’s speaker is *desenfadada*.

These three tones of voice reveal three distinct attitudes toward poetry itself. All three poets employ irony, but in each case the irony arises from a different contradiction and results in a markedly different tone. In Valente, the underlying contradiction is between the splendor of the modern poetic tradition and its residual status in contemporary society. In Benítez Reyes, the narcissistic speaker seems to be all too aware that his images are trite, but he is unable to step outside of his stereotypically “literary” patterns of thought: the resulting irony is self-parodic. Finally, Isla Correyero’s poem achieves its comic effect

through a contrast between the potentially grave error (mistaking a live body for a dead one) and the speaker's flippant tone. In this last case, of course, the irony has nothing directly to do with the status of poetry per se, in part because the speaker of the poem is not defined implicitly as a "poet," as in the other two texts. Correyero is much less encumbered by the weight of literary tradition and by readerly expectations about what poetry should sound like. The *desenfado* that characterizes many of the younger women poets of the past twenty years is a sign of an absence of anxiety about the survival of any particular version of the literary tradition.

If poetry is merely residual in contemporary society, then its future is precarious despite its prestige among a group of elite readers. The poetry of experience, on the other hand, attempts to salvage poetry by appealing to a mainstream audience that cares less intensely about the survival of poetry. As is evident in Benítez Reyes's "Apunte," this dominant school often simply reinscribes the cultural problem in a parodic but ultimately conservative mode. Despite its constant appeal to realism and verisimilitude, the poetry of experience remains resolutely "literary" or "poetic," in the conventional sense of these terms. The evocation of the real, of course, is always a transparently ideological gesture. Realism itself, however, is not inherently reactionary: many of the poets in Isla Correyero's *Feroces* write in a direct, autobiographical mode that approximates the ideal of "experience," though without García Montero's and Benítez Reyes's finely nuanced appeals to the ordinary-yet-cultivated reader.

Both residual late modernism and the poetry of experience have quite a bit invested in particular versions of the literary past; thus they stake their claims to future viability on the survival of specific definitions of poetry. In both cases, the traditions invoked are versions of what was once understood as poetic "modernity." Valente's modernity derives from a tradition of difficult, linguistically dense poetry (Mallarmé, Celan). García Montero is "modern," on the other hand, in the urbane, conversational mode of Auden and Gil de Biedma. Both traditions are potentially rich sources of poetic innovation; in the current field of literary values, however, both are stuck in a sort of holding pattern. The future of Spanish poetry lies elsewhere: in the alternative poetic practices, some as yet undefined, that were beginning to emerge in the final years of the twentieth century.

One danger in this confident prediction is that it is too respectful of the lines drawn by Spanish poets, anthologists, and critics. Studies of these ideological divisions (including my own book) inevitably give inordinate emphasis to anthologies, since these provide *prima facie* evidence of how the poetry world conceives of itself. The problem is that the same poet, included in anthologies of opposing tendencies, might be read differently. Is the Jorge Riechmann of *Postnovísimos* the same as that of *La prueba del nueve*? Is he the "Jorge Riechman"

[sic] of *Feroces*? Is his poetry a left-wing version of the often conservative poetry of experience, or does his commitment to radicalism automatically place him in the category of “difference”? By the same token, the persistent discrimination against women poets in mainstream anthologies tends to obscure the differences among them. Esperanza López Parada is the token woman in *Fin de siglo*. Is she a neo-classicist, as Villena would have it? Or does she fit more comfortably in Ortega’s *La prueba del nueve*, where she is one of three women poets, or in the gynocentric *Ellas tienen la palabra*?

While I am not arguing for a liberation from ideological preconceptions, the tendentious divisions of the poetic field enacted in these anthologies do indeed erect artificial barriers and distort perceptions. What is more, this territorial imperative is not an accidental by-product, but the main cultural function that anthologies serve. This divisiveness can clarify the ideological and aesthetic issues at stake in the debate, but it also conceals potential points of convergence between seemingly irreconcilable positions. Only one poet—Alberto Tesán—is included in both *10 menos 30* and *Feroces*. These two anthologies, then, offer essentially separate visions of contemporary Spanish poetry. This lack of convergence almost certainly reflects the explicit division between poetic mainstream and poetic margin: Villena and Correyero are equally self-conscious about their advocacy of “orthodox” and “heterodox” poetics, respectively. Yet both of these anthologies, published only a year apart, feature poets of the same age-group and promote a revival of poetic “realism” inspired by writers like Raymond Carver and Charles Bukowski. The dominant tone in each anthology reflects the anthologist’s overt agenda: Villena’s selections tend to be more low-keyed and lyrical, in contrast with the stridency of Correyero’s *radicales*. Yet this blatant difference obscures a significant commonality between these two groups of poets: poets of “experience,” in their attempt to break free from the restrictions of this school, are moving in more or less the same direction as “marginal” poets, to the extent that at least one of these poets finds himself in the strange position of being both a representative of the dominant school and a poetic rebel.

The vigorous debate surrounding the issue of poetic value in contemporary Spain is itself a sign of the continued vitality of the genre. The perceived marginality of poetry in relation to other forms of cultural expression, then, is not necessarily cause for pessimism. An art form with a relatively small but impassioned audience can achieve a concentrated energy that is sometimes lacking in genres that are more directly subject to market forces. Contemporary Spanish fiction, for example, reaches a larger audience but may not enjoy the same degree of creative ferment. In the words of Antonio Gamoneda, a poet ambiguously situated between a late modernist aesthetic and the poetics of difference,

La poesía, ajena al mercado y escasa en funciones externas, es, por ello precisamente, la única actividad que, dentro de las circunstancias, puede escapar el gregarismo. En el fervor minoritario, en la subjetivación radical, en la amplificación “anormal” del lenguaje, ahí se ha producido la mutación cualitativa que legitima su supervivencia, la que se logra en el carácter de la propia máquina poética y en la intensificación de la vida del emisor y de unos pocos receptores. (21)

(Poetry, alien to the market and poor in external functions, is, precisely for this reason, the only activity that, in these circumstances, can avoid gregariousness. In the fervor of a minority, in a radical subjectivism, in the “abnormal” amplification of language, there has taken shape the qualitative mutation that legitimates its survival, which is achieved in the character of the poetic mechanism itself and in the intensification of the life of the emitter and of a few receptors.)

Perhaps a reversal of perspectives is in order, then: rather than asking how poetry can lay a claim to the postmodern cultural imagination, one might ask what hope there is for a culture that neglects the poetic imagination.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the opening pages of Villena’s introduction to *10 menos 30* (9–12).
- 2 Responding to my article “How to be Great,” in which I note the persistence of modernist values in the poetic canon, George Yúdice offers “una explicación acaso demasiado simplista. De todos los géneros literarios y artísticos, la poesía es el más alejado del mercado, fundamento de evaluación según mucho en tiempos posmodernos. Ese alejamiento del mercado se traduce en escasez de lectores, en especial los que pertenecen al público masivo. El público lector de la poesía hoy en día suele consistir en los poetas mismos” (401). This observation has very limited validity: it might explain the persistence of a certain late modernism, but it fails to account for the entire field of poetic production and consumption. Hiperión and Visor continue to publish original collections of peninsular and Latin American poetry, along with translations of foreign language poets, at a brisk rate, suggesting an audience that extends well beyond the producers themselves. The audience for contemporary poetry is actually far larger now than it was in the 1920s, in the heyday of modernism.
- 3 The terms *residual*, *dominant*, and *emergent* are taken from Raymond Williams’s *Marxism and Literature*. My analysis of contemporary Spanish poetry, however, owes more to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field. I have analyzed the residual poetry in the high modern tradition in “Nuevos textos sagrados” and “How to be Great.”
- 4 Whereas Villena’s *Postnovísimos* is eclectic, *Fin de siglo* is devoted exclusively to the poetry of experience. See the discussion of *10 menos 30* below. García Martín’s *La generación de los ochenta* and *Selección nacional* are more restrictive than Villena’s anthologies.
- 5 See the essays collected in García Montero’s *Confesiones poéticas*, along with his introduction to Felipe Benítez Reyes’s *Poesía* and the book written in collaboration with Antonio Muñoz Molina, *Por qué no es útil la literatura*.
- 6 For an ideological critique of García Montero’s poetics, see my article “The Avant-Garde and its Discontents.”
- 7 My negative characterization of García Montero is, of course, open to debate. Indubitably he is a capable writer who has been able to connect with his audience. My point here is that his position as a leading contemporary poet is inexplicable in the hierarchy of values that privileges modernist or late modernist poets like Rilke, Lezama Lima, or Ashbery.

- 8 Felipe Benítez Reyes, writing under the pseudonym “Eligio Rabanera,” pokes fun at the very idea of a dominant school in his tongue-in-cheek introduction to *El sindicato del crimen*. The real target of his irony, however, are those who view his own faction as too powerful. He proposes a facetious list of goals for poets in this dominant school, including being corrupt, sending Christmas presents to critics, and even “No ser buena persona” (12). The point of this satire, presumably, is to disarm criticism by suggesting that the idea of a corrupt poetic “crime syndicate” dominating Spanish poetry is absurd. Maybe so, but his anthology does include all the “usual suspects.” See Medina for a useful account of the debate surrounding the real or perceived dominance of this school.
- 9 Ironically, the theme of failure occurs frequently in poets of the dominant, ostensibly “successful” school, especially Felipe Benítez Reyes and José Gutiérrez.
- 10 A fourth segment of the reading public is the mass audience that lacks intellectual or literary pretensions; since these readers are likely to be attracted to popular forms of entertainment rather than to books, many of them, are, in fact, non-readers. In any case, this is not the audience envisioned by contemporary Spanish poets, even by those whose work is written in an accessible style.
- 11 In October of 1999 I interviewed Jesús Munárriz, the director of Hiperión, the largest publisher of poetry in Spain. He envisions the audience for poetry as being predominantly young. Affordable pricing is thus a key to reaching this public: most books in the Hiperión collection cost 900 pesetas, slightly more than the price of a movie ticket. There is a core audience who will purchase twenty or thirty books a year. Poetry books are printed in editions of 1,000 to 3,000 copies, and an edition will sell out in a period of time ranging anywhere from a month to ten years. Hiperión’s current “best-seller” is José Hierro’s *Cuaderno de Nueva York*, which had sold 23,000 copies as of October, 1999. Munárriz’s eclecticism, in my estimation, is the key to his success: he helped to create the boom in women’s poetry in the 1980s; but he has also published numerous books by García Montero and Felipe Benítez Reyes.
- 12 Bourdieu’s analysis here is especially pertinent because it describes developments in nineteenth-century French literature that produced the categories still used today to refer to cultural divisions: *avant-garde*, *academic*, *bourgeois*, etc.
- 13 From this same perspective, the most egregious “élitists” are actually the conservative, “middle-brow” cultural critics. Prestigious intellectuals are presumably sophisticated enough to shun stereotypically “élitist” positions, although they often fail to do so. Accounts of the high/low split usually avoid dealing with the treacherous middle ground. Among recent theorists, Bourdieu has the most clearly articulated theory of “middle-brow” culture:
- This middle-brow culture (*culture moyenne*) owes some of its charm, in the eyes of the middle classes who are its main consumers, to the references to legitimate culture it contains and which encourage and justify confusion of the two—accessible versions of avant-garde experiments or accessible works which pass for avant-garde experiments, film “adaptations” of classic drama and literature, “popular arrangements” of classical music or “orchestral versions” of popular tunes, vocal interpretations of classics in a style evocative of scout choruses or angelic choirs, in short, everything that goes to make up “quality” weeklies and “quality” shows, which are entirely organized to give the impression of bringing legitimate culture within the reach of all, by combining two normally exclusive characteristics, immediate accessibility and the outward signs of cultural legitimacy. (*Distinction* 232)
- While Bourdieu is often read as an anti-élitist, this description of petit-bourgeois culture is itself written from a decidedly “high-brow” perspective.
- 14 Although any poem can be read metapoetically, I am hesitant to push this reading of Correyero’s poem too far. In fact, it was only through the juxtaposition of this text to

the other two poems that this interpretation suggested itself to me. *Diario de una enfermera*, like Valente's "Paisaje con pájaros amarillos," is an elegiac work, dominated by the death of the speaker's father. (Valente's sequence was written for his dead son Antonio.) I would interpret both poems somewhat differently in the context of the books of poetry to which they belong.

CHAPTER THREE

Poetry, Politics, and Power

“Repito: una historia rutinaria. La mediocridad tomó el poder.”
(I repeat: a routine story. Mediocrity took power.)
(Subirats 55)

Many might consider poetry to be culturally insignificant in the contemporary period. Although the audience for the genre remains relatively small, it could easily be demonstrated that more Spaniards purchase and read books of poetry now than in previous decades. The problem, in my view at least, lies elsewhere: despite modest gains in readership, poetry remains the genre most heavily dependent on “cultural capital.” In a climate that increasingly privileges market forces over seemingly outmoded notions of literary quality or prestige, poetry is bound to seem diminished in stature. Yet the genre apparently retains enough of its lustre to be a prize worth squabbling over: debates between warring factions of poets have become particularly acrimonious in the past twenty years, and the ensuing controversy has larger implications for Spanish literary culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To understand what is at stake in these “guerrillas poéticas” it is necessary to put aside close reading for a moment and look at the larger cultural context. In this chapter I would like to explore the way in which a particular school of poetry, the so-called “poetry of experience,” has achieved quasi-official status in post-Franco Spain, to the detriment of other creative options. What is particularly fascinating about this process is the way in which political, educational, and literary institutions converge in order to overdetermine the premature canonization of this poetic school. While close literary analysis is indispensable in the study of poetry, and for very good reasons, my focus here will be on the seemingly extraneous factors that help to explain the success of this school.¹

What exactly is the “poetry of experience”? The phrase has its origin in Robert Langbaum’s *The Poetry of Experience*, a study of the dramatic monologue in nineteenth-century English poetry. This book fell into the hands of Spanish poets of the 1950s (especially Jaime Gil de Biedma) who admired the dramatic monologues of Luis Cernuda. Beginning in the 1980s, a group of young, mostly

Andalusian poets revived the idea of a “poetry of experience” in order to define their own aesthetic stance. While the poets of the 1950s were reacting against the less complex aesthetic of “social poetry,” the new poets of the 1980s, especially Luis García Montero, directed their hostility to the supposed excesses of the *novísimos* of the 1970s. Although Gil de Biedma is a highly innovative poet, in his historical context, the attempt to return to the aesthetics of the 1950s *after* the *novísimos* acquires a decidedly reactionary cast. The basic tenet underlying García Montero’s stance is that the literary avant-garde has been a historical failure.

Since this chapter does not deal directly with the poetry of writers like García Montero, Jon Juaristi, or Felipe Benítez Reyes, it runs the risk of overgeneralizing. While in my opinion no single poet from this tendency is unquestionably great, it would be unfair to paint them all with the same brush. García Montero, as we saw in Chapter 1, writes mostly about personal experiences, which “are generally produced by remembrances of places and events from the persona’s past” (Debicki, *Twentieth-Century Spanish Poetry* 203). Juaristi is best known for his caustic commentaries on the situation in the Basque country. Benítez Reyes, who has made two appearances in this book so far, is perhaps the most talented writer of the group, a master of intertextual parody. While I have myself been identified as a harsh critic of the “poetry of experience,” my major objection is to the idea that it represents a salutary normalization of Spanish poetry in the 1980s. I object, not to Benítez Reyes’s poetry, which I quite enjoy, but to García Montero’s reactionary defence of this poetry and the accompanying attacks on the *novísimos* of the 1970s. García Montero himself is a clever and talented writer, and those who enjoy his poetry are entitled to their own taste. Once again, my principal argument is with the notion that this sort of writing is the only valid option for the contemporary Spanish poet, that it is a historical necessity to reject the avant-garde and write like García Montero.

Although the “poetry of experience” is ostensibly more aligned with the left than with the right, it encompasses politically conservative poets as well. It would be a mistake, however, to take a poet’s professed ideology at face-value. For Antonio Gamoneda, the political significance of this school has more to do with institutional power than with ideology per se:

Más claramente: entiendo que este sector de la poesía española presenta concordancia con las formas de poder del posfranquismo, ya sean éstas de corte socialdemócrata, escoradamente centrista o llanamente derechista. El caso es que los premios oficiales y oficiosos, los medios de comunicación, las editoriales relacionadas con ministerios y corporaciones, los libros de texto “recomendables” y los editados con dinero público, los críticos que quieren “hacer carrera” y en sus *poses*, los propios jefes de gobierno, es decir, la práctica totalidad de los poderes capaces de suscitar popularidad, consumo y, en modesta medida, atributos de una especie

de *star-system*, suelen preferir a estos poetas “inteligibles” que yo considero *mini-realistas*. (“Poesía española” 26–27; emphasis in original)

(More clearly stated: I understand that this sector of Spanish poetry is consonant with the form of power of Postfrancoism, whether these are social-democratic, plainly centrist, or obviously rightist. The case is that the official (and officious) prizes, the communications media, publishing houses associated with ministries and corporations, “recommended” textbooks and those edited with state funds, critics who want to “make a career,” and, in their poses, the very heads of the government, in other words, practically the sum total of all the powers capable of producing popularity, consumption, and, in a modest degree, a kind of star-system, usually prefer poets who are “intelligible” and whom I consider “mini-realist.”)

There are at least two points worth emphasizing in this remarkable declaration. In the first place, Gamoneda does not condemn this school of poetry for its ostensible ideological affiliations, which, in fact, seem extraordinarily fluid. As the use of the subjunctive mood suggests, it almost does not matter whether these “forms of power” belong to left, right or center: what these poets share is a desire to achieve institutional status, to become canonized as the official Spanish poets of the period. The other point is that these institutions themselves, whether they be of right, left, or center, all converge to support the same sort of poetry, based on the twin principles of realism and intelligibility. It is worth noting that Gamoneda’s essay appeared in *La Alegría de los Naufragios*, a literary journal that brings together poets, philosophers, and critics who oppose the dominance of the “poetry of experience.”

Gamoneda’s description appears almost paranoid in its description of multiple institutions converging to lend their stamp of approval to this poetic movement: even “los jefes del gobierno” are in on the plot! Yet such a confluence of power is, on the face of it, not at all implausible. Close ties among Spanish journalists, academics, writers, critics, and politicians are the rule rather than the exception. Two prominent poets, Jon Juaristi and Luis Alberto de Cuenca, were appointed to high positions by the Aznar government, but their cases are merely the most obvious. Nor is there any need to posit a well-planned conspiracy to promote this poetic school: in fact, this sort of poetry perfectly embodies the cultural aspirations and policies of the Spanish government during the period in question.

The PSOE government of Felipe González promoted the triumphalist idea of a forward-looking and thoroughly “European” Spain. While renouncing Marxist ideology and rushing to join NATO and the European Union, it wanted to be perceived as leftist, since it still needed to distinguish itself from the post-Franco Right of the AP (later PP). The writers most useful to the Felipe González regime, then, would be those professing a sentimental allegiance to the left while promoting the idea of a poetry written in an intelligible manner for “normal”

citizens of a democratic society. The poet of the moment, by this logic, would be Luis García Montero, the *de facto* leader of the “poetry of experience.”

Gamoneda, in the article cited above, associates this new “realism” with the “socialist realism” of the 1950s:

En definitiva, creo que los poetas españoles jóvenes localizables en este “campo” situándose en una tradición *débil*—valga otra vez el adjetivo—, configuran un difuso y diverso *minirrealismo*, que bien pudiera ser al liberalismo de mercado y al neocapitalismo lo que el realismo socialista, igualmente estéril y académico, fue al comunismo institucionalizado en los que se llamaron “países del Este.” (“Poesía española” 26; emphasis in original)

(Definitively, I believe that those young Spanish poets localizable in this “field” situating itself in a *weak* tradition—once again let that adjective stand—comprise a diffuse and diverse *mini-realism*, that well might be to market neo-liberalism and neo-capitalism what socialist realism, an equally sterile and academic movement, was to institutionalized Communism in the so-called “Eastern Countries.”)

The comparison is apt in several respects: socialist realism was, of course, the official literary doctrine of the culturally conservative Communist Party, both in the Eastern Bloc and in Western European countries of the cold-war era. In twentieth-century literature, “realism” tends to be the preferred vehicle for the imposition of a particular ideologically correct vision of reality. The poets of the 1980s, moreover, find a model for a social realism close at hand. Spanish poetry of the 1950s, especially that written by Communist Party members or fellow travellers like Ángel González and Jaime Gil de Biedma, provides the immediate model for Luis García Montero and other poets of his school. These earlier poets, of course, cannot be defined solely in terms of realism: their value lies in the way in which they were able to transcend the tenets of social poetry, as defined by older Communist Party poets like Blas de Otero and Gabriel Celaya. What is relevant from my perspective, however, is that García Montero and his group tend to value Spanish poets of the 1950s for their *realism* rather than for their attempts to go beyond it.

The Partido Popular government of José María Aznar (1996–2003) promoted policies somewhat similar to the PSOE in the realm of culture. While it has favored more ideologically conservative writers, the same principles of realism and intelligibility still hold sway. Jon Juaristi, better known now for his essays on Basque nationalism than for his poetry, passed from the Biblioteca Nacional to the directorship of the Instituto Cervantes, the institution charged with promoting Spanish culture abroad. What is interesting from my perspective is that Juaristi’s views of poetry do not differ substantially from those of Luis García Montero and other poets associated with the vague leftism of the PSOE government. At the same time, however, it is difficult to know whether this support for a particular concept of culture forms part of a larger plan or is

simply the result of inertia. One would need to study the cultural policies of the PP in much greater detail in order to draw firmer conclusions. In fact, more rigorous accounts of the cultural policies of the Socialists would also be helpful in sorting through these questions. In the absence of such studies, I have had to rely a good deal on anecdotal evidence.

Critical arguments that turn poetry into a mere “symptom” of a larger political and cultural movement can be reductive, to say the least. In this case, however, the relation is relatively transparent: the poets themselves justify their poetics by appealing to political bywords like “normalization” and “Europeanization.” Whether explicitly or implicitly, they argue that their work exemplifies the democratic and European character of post-Franco Spain. These arguments have had the intended effect of conferring an aura of historical inevitability or naturalness onto the ascent of the “poetry of experience.” Indeed, supporters of this school scoff at the notion that has been any attempt to exclude other sorts of poetry from the public arena. The anthology *El sindicato del crimen* was published with the explicit intent of parodying, and thus defusing, the widespread criticism of this group of poets as a well-organized literary mafia. Supporters of the “poetry of experience” also point to the fact that poets representing opposing tendencies have also published books and won prizes during this period. Even so, no one on either side of the debate denies the ascent of this school to quasi-official status during the 1980s and 1990s.

In my view, the “poetry of experience” could only have achieved such a degree of success in a cultural climate favorable to a new model of the writer-intellectual as servant to the cultural policies of the state.² The paradigm dominant in the 1960s and 70s, according to which the intellectual was called upon to embody a spirit of fierce independence, was rooted in avant-garde principles. This is not to say that all, or even most, writers were vanguardists during this period. The idea, rather, was that intellectuals had the duty to take political and artistic stands rooted in their own integrity as writers, ignoring both institutional power and the literary marketplace. There is much to criticize in this paradigm: as many before me have pointed out, it is inherently elitist and is often associated with the taking of seemingly arrogant or intransigent positions. One can also criticize the particular political choices adopted by many intellectuals during this period. The French (and Spanish) flirtation with Maoism in the 1970s seems especially foolish. Still, it is easy to see the contrast between the intellectual substance of José Ángel Valente or Juan Goytisolo (neither of whom was ever a Maoist) and the new model of the writer promoted since the 1980s. Subirats has defined this new model in the following terms: “Con todo eso, por formato social se generó un nuevo tipo de intelectual no definido tanto por su conocimiento o sus contenidos, ni garantizado por una crítica y diálogos por lo demás inexistentes, sino más bien diseñado como imagen” (As a consequence,

by social format a new category of intellectuals was generated, defined not by their knowledge or content, nor guaranteed by a critique and a dialogue that did not exist anyway, but rather designed as an image) (Subirats 97).³

Félix de Azúa, a poet and novelist who came to prominence with the publication of Castellet's *Nueve novísimos* in 1970, has a particularly illuminating perspective on this transition, since he has, by his own admission, been an avant-garde poet, a Maoist, and a writer of both experimental and realist fiction. The experimental novel of the 1970s, generally held to be unreadable, became obsolete with the death of Franco:

Llevados por el impulso de nuestra indudable vocación europea, muchos escritores decidimos [...] ayudar a nuestros colegas continentales a mejor comprender la literatura española mediante el bonito procedimiento de escribir novelas comprensibles; sobre todo, comprensibles para un francés, un belga, un suizo, en fin, un hombre radicalmente normal [...] Era difícil, pero ¿no veíamos a nuestros amigos trotskistas y estalinistas y anarquistas haciendo de subsecretarios generales técnicos? ¿Íbamos nosotros a ser menos? Era difícil, pero estábamos dispuestos a todo, incluso a no ser experimentales. (Azúa, *El aprendizaje de la decepción* 217)

(Carried along by the impulse of our undeniably European vocation, many of us writers decided to help our continental colleagues to better understand Spanish literature by the pleasant procedure of writing comprehensible novels; above all, comprehensible to a Frenchman, a Belgian, a Swiss, that is, a radically normal man. It was difficult, but weren't we seeing our Trotskyite and Stalinist and Anarchist friends becoming "general technical undersecretaries"? Were we going to be left behind? It was difficult, but we were willing to do anything, even to stop being experimental.)

Azúa's analogy, though highly questionable, is quite transparent: experimental writing is to realist, "comprehensible" fiction as revolutionary politics is to run-of-the-mill government bureaucracy in a democratic society. The revolutionary becomes a technocrat, just as the avant-garde writer turns to a blander, more conventional fiction. As we saw in Chapter 1, Luis García Montero argues along the same lines in his introduction to the poetry of Felipe Benítez Reyes. Indeed, the argument about the unreadability of the experimental novel of the 1970s is identical, in form and substance, to the attacks on the *novísimos* undertaken by García Montero and his group. This line of thinking has always seemed questionable to me, in any case. There are experimental novels of variable quality: if no Spanish writer of the period wrote a novel comparable to *Rayuela*, it is not because the experimental novel itself is doomed to failure. Azúa himself has written interesting novels of both types. His earlier, denser novels like *Las lecciones de Jena* retain a certain interest, while his later works of fiction are perhaps more readable, but with less intellectual substance.

Azúa goes on to discuss his own aims as a novelist in the following terms:

La segunda de mis intenciones es cultivar una artesanía, la novela, cuya dignidad se funda en la acertada y exacta relación de los juegos del sexo y del dinero, es decir, la acertada y exacta significación de las figuras de la historia. Y la tercera de mis intenciones es cultivar esa artesanía a semejanza de nuestros ahora ya inevitables compañeros europeos, sin pretensiones nacionales, sin pretensiones provinciales, sin pretensiones locales, con la neutra, monótona, rutinaria, modesta, pero excelente capacidad laboral de un buen conductor de autobuses holandés o de un ginecólogo suizo. (*El aprendizaje de la decepción* 218)

(The second of my aims is to cultivate a craft, that of the novel, whose worthiness is founded on the accurate and precise relationships in the games of sex and money, in other words, on the accurate and precise signification of the figures of the plot. And the third of my aims is to cultivate this craft in the same way as our now inevitable European colleagues, with no national pretensions, no provincial pretensions, no local pretensions, with the neutral, monotonous, routine, modest, but excellent capacity for work of a good Dutch bus-driver or Swiss gynecologist.)

The idea of “normality,” associated with comparatively prosperous continental nations, rings strangely hollow here. The notion seems to be that Spain, as a fully-fledged member of the European Union, should produce a literature that is “European” in the most generic (that is, the least specific) possible sense of the word. Azúa, however, offers no concrete reason why this literature should be emulated. His own adjectives, in fact, make the culture of Northern Europe sound mind-numbingly dull (“neutra, monótona, rutinaria, modesta”), and one has the sense that he does not have in mind any *particular* literary tradition in Belgium, Switzerland, or the Netherlands. (I would suspect that very few writers from these “minor” literatures are well-known to European readers generally.) His entire line of thinking begs several questions: Is a generically European literature necessarily more interesting or vital than Latin American or North African literature? Why would a Dane or an Austrian choose to read a Spanish novel that is indistinguishable from a Norwegian or Dutch novel? Indeed, how does a literature that seems to come from no place at all stake any claim at all to the reader’s attention?

In fairness to Félix de Azúa, it should be noted that few writers are as brutally self-critical as the author of such novels as *Historia de un idiota contado por él mismo* and *Diario de un hombre humillado*, both of which feature self-abasing first-person narrators. If Azúa’s observations in the paragraph quoted above are perfectly self-refuting, then the effect is surely intentional. One of his aims is to demystify literature, making it sound as banal as bus-driving. In so doing, however, he lampoons this demystification through a *reductio ad absurdum*. These observations do reflect a prevalent attitude in literary circles, even if Azúa himself cannot assert them without irony. The dichotomy he sets up, between a stereotypical Spanish *costumbrismo*—“las sórdidas historias de costureras y farmacéuticos en pequeños pueblos de provincias pobres” (the sordid stories

of seamstresses and pharmacists in small villages of impoverished provinces) (Azúa, *El aprendizaje de la decepción* 217)—and an equally unexciting European culture, is, of course, profoundly misleading. It is essentially a choice between two equally unappealing caricatures. This impasse comes about as the logical result of the so-called “desacralization” of literature: if the writer is no longer the repository of any special prestige, then he (or she) will be cast as low-level political/cultural bureaucrat, a kind of “subsecretario general técnico” of literature.

Of course, the idea that Northern European literature is of necessity bland and colorless is itself the product of an unexamined and tenacious stereotype: the Romantic-era dichotomy between the underdeveloped but impassioned Mediterranean and the cold, Protestant North. This hoary opposition, which also underlies Azúa’s comic contrast between the ardent revolutionary and the routinized bureaucrat, still surfaces in Spanish novels of the 1980s, like Esther Tusquets’s *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* and Carme Riera’s *Cuestión de amor propio*. To make Spain “European” one must have some first-hand acquaintance with European culture itself. A reliance on cultural stereotyping is a symptom of a profound lack of first-hand knowledge. As Eduardo Subirats argues:

Otra cosa no había: no ha existido una recepción amplia y crítica del pensamiento europeo, no ha existido un real intercambio de ideas, no ha existido una verdadera información sobre la historia, las culturas y las sociedades europeas de hoy. Europa se convertía progresivamente en un emblema vacío en la misma medida en que se cerraban las puertas a otras posibilidades de intercambio, participación y comunicación. (83–4)

(There was nothing else: there has not been a broad and critical reception of European thought, there has not been a real interchange of ideas, there has not been any genuine information about the history, the cultures, and the societies of contemporary Europe. Europe was progressively becoming an empty emblem, to the extent that the doors were being closed to other possibilities of interchange, participation, and communication.)

Azúa’s spurious appeal to European normality (exemplified by the Dutch bus-driver and the Swiss gynecologist) perfectly illustrates Subirats’s idea of Europe as an “emblema vacío.” One thinks of the fatuous novelist Miguel in Riera’s *Cuestión de amor propio* who plans to write a series of superficial articles on Scandinavia in hopes of currying favor with the Nobel Prize Committee. Elena Delgado makes a similar point in a somewhat different context: “the constant invocations to ‘Europeanness,’ modernity and normalcy present in the political and cultural discourse predominant in the Spanish state are not accompanied by a rigorous intellectual interrogation of those terms” (Delgado). Since Azúa himself is steeped in European culture to a much greater degree than the vast majority of his contemporaries, one can only read his statements as clever

parodies or as extreme examples of intellectual masochism.

Despite the attempt to reduce writers to the status of functionaries in an “ideological state apparatus” (to borrow a phrase from Louis Althusser), writers still depend to a large extent on the aura once associated with the idea of “Art” or “Literature.”⁴ Without this prestige, after all, the state would have little use for literature in the first place. One can easily imagine the usefulness of a rather unremarkable Spanish novel (written in the spirit of a Swiss gynecologist, perhaps) winning a prestigious European literary prize in Brussels or Venice. An award like this serves to reassure the political elite in Madrid that Spain is indeed a modern, European country. The problem, however, is that this prestige is based on a model of literature that has been explicitly rejected. How can modest political functionaries command the respect once accorded to visionary poets or intellectuals of the old school?

Poetry is ultimately more dependent than narrative fiction on its aura of prestige. The novel is a commercial product as well as a repository of aesthetic value, but poetry stands or falls on its capacity to evoke the admiration of literary intellectuals. The shift in the writer’s public role, from revolutionary outcast to state functionary, affects poetry with special severity. The main arguments used to justify a more mundane poetry, supposedly written for “normal” people, echo Azúa’s explanation of the turn away from the experimental novel (García Montero, “Felipe Benítez Reyes”). The main difference between the genres, however, is that the novel is much better able to adapt to this shift. Many contemporary Spanish novels recount fairly ordinary plots in serviceable but unremarkable prose, with little or no emphasis placed on literary innovation. Poetry, in contrast, brings with it a higher level of expectation, in light of its greater dependence on the prestige of the high modernist tradition. Those seeking a satisfying but undemanding reading experience are more likely to pick up a novel than a book of poems in the first place.

Since poets are less likely than novelists to receive income from the actual sales of their books, they are also more dependent on governmental and quasi-governmental sources of income, including money from literary prizes, lecture and reading fees, and direct grants from foundations or institutions. Many poets also hold university or government appointments. According to a prominent Spanish poet who did not wish to be identified in this book, the combined income from such sources can be quite substantial for a poet in official favor. Official support for the arts in Spain is fairly generous, and the result is that poetry can be a quite lucrative career for anyone who is tapped into this pipeline.

These observations confirm once again Gamoneda’s insight about the various institutional factors that converge to make a poet “popular.” Since the market for poetry is so small in the first place, it does not take much to create

the occasional small bubble effect. The promotion of José Hierro's *Cuaderno de Nueva York*, which recently became a poetry "best-seller" at more than 23,000 copies, is a case in point. The awarding of several important prizes, culminating in the Cervantes, allowed this already successful book to sell even more copies. Hierro, of course, was one of the most prominent poets of the first generation after the Civil War, and his case has no *direct* bearing on current controversies about the state of poetry. At the same time, however, his poetry does meet contemporary expectations of accessibility and "realism." What is relevant from my perspective is how the entire literary and journalistic world converged to celebrate his achievement.

The "poetry of experience," then, occupies a peculiar limbo: as was suggested in Chapter 2, it rejects the modernist/avant-garde model of poetry, but also has difficulty providing the simple pleasures of the middle-brow novel. In the absence of either widespread popular support or the aura of prestige associated with the Great Moderns, this school has chosen to align itself with powerful political and academic interests. Its goal is to achieve official status as a literary "generation." As any student of twentieth-century Spanish literature knows, a literary generation is an all-male group of writers designed with the purpose of defining an amorphous reality in an arbitrary, ideologically tendentious, yet seemingly objective way. By one measure, at least, the attempt to establish the "poetry of experience" as the "dominant" or "hegemonic" tendency of the 1980s and beyond has been successful: most anthologies devoted to the period are dominated by this school. What is striking from my perspective, though, is how inadequately these anthologies reflect the true vitality of contemporary Spanish poetry. The generational paradigm (ardently defended by the influential anthologist José Luis García Martín, among others) discriminates by age, by gender, and usually by ideology as well. Since a large proportion of the most interesting poetry of the 1980s and 1990s has been written by women or by poets who belong, chronologically, to earlier "generations," the nearly all-male generational anthologies that continue to be published are becoming increasingly irrelevant.

What of poets who do not belong to the dominant school? A glance at the contents of the first three issues of *La Alegría de los Naufragios* (1999–2001) reveals a line-up of poets from the 1950s (Gamoneda, Valente), *novísimos* (Pere Gimferrer, Guillermo Carnero, Jaime Siles, Ana María Moix, Antonio Colinas), and women whose poetry first appeared in the 1980s (Blanca Andreu, Amalia Iglesias, Lola Velasco, Julia Castillo), alongside sympathetic literary theorists and philosophers (José M. Cuesta Abad, Eugenio Trías, Isidoro Reguera), and the odd American Hispanist (Mayhew).⁵ The conception of poetry that emerges from the essays published in *La Alegría de los Naufragios* is derived primarily from German Romanticism, Heidegger, and the French avant-garde. What the journal

represents, then, is an essentially Spanish version of late-modernist poetics, as exemplified by Valente and Gamoneda, the two poets featured most prominently in its pages.

The very existence of this counter-tendency might undermine the argument I have been making. It is true that many poets who are openly hostile to the “poetry of experience” have also published books, won prizes, and enjoyed success during this period. While popular in some literary and political circles, the supposedly dominant tendency has not been able to eliminate its rivals. The late-modernist conception of poetry represented by *La Alegría de los Naufragios* retains much of its aura, and for a very logical reason: this is the literary movement, after all, that is most heavily invested in traditional appeals to poetic prestige and the most resistant to the new model of the intellectual. If there is a certain predictability in the pages of this journal, this is the result of a coherent if not monolithic vision of the modern poetic tradition. Since I myself have published there, I cannot claim to be an impartial observer. My sympathies clearly lie with the vision of modern poetry promoted by the editors, César Antonio Molina and Amalia Iglesias Serna, and my reaction to the “poetry of experience” is the result of my personal stake in this debate.

Since the late-modernist paradigm has often been criticized for its elitism, it might be useful to point out that the particular sort of “cultural capital” represented by this form of high culture is not of much use to the state, if ever it was. The argument that elite culture serves to shore up the power of the bourgeoisie was fashionable at one time, and still surfaces from time to time. The political élite in Spain, however, clearly prefers a more accessible brand of middle-brow culture that more closely mirrors its own cultural aspirations. Instead of pitting high culture against popular culture, as is customarily done, it might be helpful to think of a fierce rivalry between elite and “middle-brow” cultures. The high-brow culture of late modernism despises the facile, “light” culture of the political elites. Middle-brow culture, in turn, seeks to demystify or desacralize the mysteries of literary Modernism. Both of these cultures maintain a somewhat ambivalent relation to mass culture, though the harshest attacks on popular entertainment, in my experience at least, are more likely to come from insecure “middle-brow” critics than from élite intellectuals.

My perspective on contemporary Spanish poetry is controversial, to say the least.⁶ A critic wanting to make the case for the historical validity of the “poetry of experience,” however, might tell a story similar to mine in many particulars. Without necessarily denying the ties between poetry and political power during this period, he or she might argue that institutional support of this poetry, such as it exists, is both legitimate and benign. After all, why should the new government not promote an image of Spanish culture that is in synchrony with its own vision of Spain’s role in Europe? One could also point out that the

cultural policies of the Spanish state have not been monolithic or consistent, and that institutional support, of various kinds, has been available for a wide range of enterprises.

As for the poets, their distrust of the avant-garde model of the intellectual is based on their own experience of historical reality: one cannot ask them to follow a path that they feel is inauthentic. Furthermore, since the regimes from which they have benefited are not evil but merely corrupt to varying degrees, this form of official support for the arts is innocuous. From this perspective, even the shift away from the idea of the fiercely independent writer of the Goytisolo/Valente ilk might be seen as positive. This older model of the intellectual, after all, was the result of an unnatural political situation in which exile or internal opposition were the only legitimate options. Since Spain is now a democracy, there is no reason to be suspicious of writers and intellectuals who maintain a cosier relationship with the powers-that-be.

Without unnecessarily demonizing either the PSOE or the PP, it is still possible to question the desirability of such a close relationship between culture and state institutions. While beneficial in some respects, institutional support for the arts is not ideologically or aesthetically neutral. Even if one happens to approve of some of the poets writing under the rubric of the “poetry of experience,” the existence of an “official verse culture” or “dominant tendency” cannot be healthy.⁷ It is not merely that the “poetry of experience” enjoys an extraordinary degree of institutional support, but that its identity seems to be derived almost wholly from its semi-official status. It is naive, of course, to expect literature to exist wholly at the margins of institutions like newspapers and magazines, book publishers, universities and schools, academies, foundations, corporations, and governments, both regional and national. It should be pointed out that even poets opposed to the dominance of the “poetry of experience” write and publish in an *institutional* context: there is no unsullied space wholly apart from such entities. The question is what sort of poetry stands the best chance of achieving success in this particular institutional context. The answer, in this case, is fairly obvious, at least to me: the “poetry of experience” has risen to prominence by presenting a narrative of triumphant normalization consonant with the Spanish political elite’s self-image.

At the same time, however, this hegemonic poetic movement has been unable to dislodge the older model of the literary intellectual or to assure its own place in the literary canon. In a cultural environment in which literature itself is increasingly devalued, the poets with the best chance of survival are those who most strenuously resist the bureaucratic de-sacralization of their art.

Notes

- 1 See Raquel Medina's excellent 1998 article on the ideological conflict between rival schools of poetry in contemporary Spain. I have been particularly influenced by her observations on "la conversión de la poesía en un artículo de consumo para la clase política y la burguesía" (Medina 603).
- 2 My esteemed colleague Andrew P. Debicki is of the opinion that the poetry of the 1960s and 70s *anticipates* the open, democratic society of the 1980s: "For me, the stylistic revolution in poetry that should be linked to the new Spanish society had already occurred during the previous decade or two. The prior attacks on the view of literature as message, the new emphasis on linguistic creativity during the 1960s and its foregrounding in the 1970s, and the growing view of poetry as process had already shaken poetic styles out of old molds and thus had preceded social change. By 1980 the new state of mind that had made such shifts possible had been emerging for two decades and was fully in place among poets and readers' (Debicki, *Twentieth Century Spanish Poetry* 182). If this is the case, it is hard to explain why 1980 marks a shift *away* from what Debicki likes to call "linguistic creativity" and an explicit attack on the supposed excesses of the *novísimos*. Where Debicki goes astray, in my view, is in his lack of attention to the larger cultural context. Spanish culture of the late-Francoist period was not the reflection of a society that did not yet exist, but of the intellectual and artistic ferment of the 1960s and 1970s. By the same token, the reaction against this culture reflects the desire on the part of many writers of the period to achieve success within the new power structure. In fleeing from a seemingly reductive model of the relation between culture and society, Debicki loses sight of some fairly obvious connections.
- 3 While I sympathize with Subirats's overall perspective, his judgments are often so sweeping and dismissive that they lose a good part of their utility. One would like to know *which* intellectuals fall into this category, for example. At times, Subirats attempts to demonstrate the inadequacy of Spanish intellectual life by pointing to the fact that his *own* ideas have not achieved acceptance in Spain.
- 4 I am not, in fact, analyzing the function of literature in contemporary Spain in Althusserian terms, merely employing a term that seems particularly apt in this context.
- 5 The women poets of the 1980s, by and large, have not taken part of the "poesía de la experiencia." The dominance of this school, then, perpetuates the idea that only men are the protagonists of literary history.
- 6 One of the best-argued defenses of the "poetry of experience" that I have seen is Laura Scarano's article "La figuración realista en la poesía española de las últimas décadas," published in *La Estafeta del Viento*, a state-subsidized literary journal edited by Luis García Montero and Jesús García Sánchez. Echoing García Montero, but with a more sophisticated theoretical apparatus, Scarano argues that this poetry represents a progressively postmodern rejection of the avant-garde, and sees the demystification of poetic modernity in a wholly positive light. This position is certainly coherent on its own terms, but Scarano does not fully acknowledge the arguments of those of us who have criticized the "poetry of experience," referring only to "la resistencia de los círculos académicos a admitir una novedosa reflexión sobre los alcances de la posmodernidad artística en relación con las posibilidades de un nuevo realismo (noción altamente resistida en el género lírico y anatémizada por los profetas canónicos de la posmodernidad filosófica)" (29). No work critical of the "poetry of experience" appears in the bibliography of this otherwise thorough scholar.
- 7 I adopt the phrase "official verse culture" from the American "language" poet Charles Bernstein, whose perspective I have found especially useful. The phrase occurs throughout Bernstein's essays and interviews (Bernstein 65).

PART TWO

Valente, Gamoneda,
and the “Generation of the 1950s”

CHAPTER FOUR

In Search of Ordinary Language: Revisiting the “Generation of the 1950s”

It would be hard to underestimate the significance of the group of Spanish poets who began to write in the 1950s. Poets like Claudio Rodríguez and José Ángel Valente seem to dominate the entire second half of the twentieth century, shaping the development of Spanish poetry for nearly fifty years. From a traditional perspective, the high-water mark for this poetic “generation” is the period stretching from the late 1950s until about 1970.¹ Taking a longer view, however, it becomes apparent that a second period, from the late 1970s through the end of the century, deserves equal or even greater attention: these are the years in which other poets, like Antonio Gamoneda and María Victoria Atencia, emerge from the shadows, when Brines, Valente, and Rodríguez write some of their best poetry, and when the influence of all these figures becomes palpable in numerous younger poets.²

One of the most influential books on this group of poets, Debicki’s *Poetry of Discovery: The Spanish Generation of 1956–1971*, was published in 1982, and presented a well-defined thesis: that the originality of these poets lay not in their elaboration of a poetic language removed from ordinary speech, but in their “ways of using everyday language creatively, and of drawing on anecdotal events and personal evocations to forge new visions and to perform new discoveries through poetry” (*Poetry of Discovery* 18). In the pages that follow I would like to suggest an alternative view, based on a longer time frame and a somewhat different critical perspective. Debicki’s book, published almost thirty years ago as I write, assumed that this group had already enjoyed its apogee, in the traditional fifteen-year period afforded to a literary “generation.” Ironically enough, *Poetry of Discovery* became influential just around the time when the poets themselves were moving beyond the emphasis on “everyday language” and “anecdotal events.” Of course, Debicki could not have foreseen, in the years when he was writing this book, that this group was going to move in a different direction. The problem is that the enormous influence his book has had, especially on American Hispanists, has further magnified the temporal gap between creation and criticism.³

Debicki was correct, of course, in his emphasis on discovery, or *conocimiento*.⁴ This concept is key to understanding the poetics of Valente and Rodríguez. Barral, Gil de Biedma, and Enrique Badosa also wrote early essays centered on this concept (Riera 66–77). Debicki's view that these poets tend to use everyday or colloquial language, rather than highly elaborated or specifically "literary" styles, has also found acceptance among other critics: at least no one has stepped forward to question this characterization. Yet to me, this view of the poetic language of an entire cross-section of contemporary Spanish poetry ignores three significant points. (1) A great deal of the most accomplished poetry written by these poets does in fact employ complex, even baroque styles. (2) Language that critics call "everyday" can often seem self-consciously literary, when viewed from a different perspective: it turns out to be more difficult than one might expect to locate and define a genuinely "colloquial" style. (3) The concept of ordinary language (or "apparently ordinary language," as Debicki sometimes refers to it) is so broad that it obliterates meaningful distinctions: almost any style that does not present obvious difficulties to the reader might be called "ordinary": yet the term, depending on how it is understood, might encompass a wide range of colloquial, prosaic, or merely uninflected styles, quite distinct from one another in their origins and effects. The conflation of these concepts makes it difficult to appreciate the role that a genuinely colloquial language might play in contemporary Spanish poetry.

The approach I am proposing will lead to a much richer and more nuanced view of the poetic language of postwar and contemporary Spain. After pointing out some significant exceptions to the supposed norm of everyday or ordinary language, I will demonstrate that much of the writing that *appears* to conform to this ideal is actually more literary, more elevated in style, and more complex than literary historians have led us to believe. Ideological factors and the inertia of the critical tradition cause critics to perceive a given style as more "ordinary" than it actually is. By correcting for this ideological bias, we can come to see that the poetry of this period has never received credit for its extraordinary linguistic resourcefulness.

Noteworthy deviations from the putative norm of ordinary language can be found in very early works by poets like Rodríguez, Barral, and Caballero Bonald:

Oh, plumas timoneras. Mordedura
de la celeridad, mal retenida
si el hacha canta al pájaro cercenes
de últimos bosques y la tierra misma
salta como los peces en verano. (Rodríguez, *Poesía completa* 44)

(Oh rudder-like feathers. A biting
of celerity, badly retained

if the axe sings to the bird cuts
of final woods and the earth itself
jumps like fish in summer.)

Inaccesible escalera, gustosa
de su crimen, allí rescato
el abolido amor, la disfrazada
inocencia: mi suplicio más crédulo. (Caballero Bonald 74)

(Inaccessible staircase, taking pleasure
in its atrocity, I rescue there
abolished love, disguised
innocence: my most credulous torment)

Penetraré la cueva
de bisonte y raíl riguroso,
la piedra decimal que nunca
conoce.

Soy urgente
y frágil, de alabastro (Barral 81)

(I will penetrate the cave
of bison and rigorous rail,
the decimal stone that never
knows.

I am urgent
and fragile, of alabaster.)

All three examples date from the early 1950s. While stylistically distinct from one another, they all linguistically dense. Rodríguez's unique poetic dialect in *Don de la ebriedad* has its origins in French Symbolism and the Spanish Golden Age. Caballero Bonald is an Andalusian neo-baroque poet. Barral's *Metropolitana* is a modernist long poem in the tradition of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound; Barral's language might also be called baroque. This exploration of the possibilities of linguistic complexity, while not exactly the norm in Spanish poetry of the 1950s, is not as rare as might be supposed either. Rodríguez is arguably the most significant poet of this entire group, and his poetry, while somewhat more accessible in *Conjuros* (1958), regains complexity in his subsequent three collections. Caballero Bonald, by the same token, has never abandoned his neo-baroque style. Barral, after a flirtation with a narrative style, soon returned to a more self-consciously "difficult" mode. As we will see below, even his narrative poetry, written under the influence of social realism, employs self-consciously literary language.

The idea of a plain style is equally inapplicable to Antonio Gamoneda and María Victoria Atencia, two poets not usually included in the generational group, since they came into their own in the 1970s:

La crueldad nos hizo semejantes a los animales sagrados y nos condujimos con majestad y concertamos grandes sacrificios y ceremonias dentro de nuestro espíritu.

Descubríamos líquidos cuya densidad pesaba sobre nuestros deseos y aquellos lienzos y las escamas que conservábamos de las madres se desprendieron de nosotros: atravesábamos las creencias. (Gamoneda 240)

(Cruelty made us similar to sacred animals and we conducted ourselves with majesty and we devised great sacrifices and ceremonies within our spirit.

We discovered liquids whose density weighed on our desires and those canvases and the scales we conserved from the mothers detached themselves from us: we crossed through beliefs.)

Junio, jacarandá azul que ya me dejas,
llévame de la mano al fuego del solsticio
con velas que saltan mientras se extiende el trébol
y me persuade un mar que belleza asegura. (Atencia 23)

(June, blue jacaranda already leaving me,
take me by the hand to the fire of the solstice
with candles that leap while the clover is extended
and I am persuaded by a sea that beauty assures.)

Gamoneda's *Descripción de la mentira* draws its biblical cadences from poets like St. John-Perse, René Char, and León Felipe. Atencia, though she is less overtly baroque than Caballero Bonald, also writes in an ornate Andalusian tradition. In the 1970s, poets like Brines, Valente, and Crespo also begin to elaborate more complex, self-consciously "literary" styles. As time moves on, it becomes less and less clear that everyday or "ordinary" language is the prevailing norm.

The obvious objection to my argument thus far is that these are exceptional cases: Gamoneda and Atencia do not even belong to this "generation," as traditionally defined. Surely the norm in this period is a Wordsworthian plain style? Luis García Jambrina's sensible generalization might still be acceptable to many critics:

En consonancia con todo lo anterior, hay que decir que, *salvo notorias excepciones*, como la de Carlos Barral, y algunos libros concretos de Claudio Rodríguez, Valente o Caballero Bonald, se trata, *por lo general*, de una poesía de carácter reflexivo o meditativo, ritmo fluido, estilo antirretórico, tono conversacional y lenguaje eminentemente coloquial. De ahí que la posible dificultad de entendimiento de algunos textos no venga del registro léxico o semántico utilizado, sino de la zona de la experiencia o de la realidad explorada en el poema. (60; emphasis added)

(In accordance with the preceding discussion, we must conclude that, except for some notorious exceptions, like Carlos Barral and some specific books by Claudio Rodríguez, Valente or Caballero Bonald, this is a poetry, generally speaking, of reflexive or meditative character, fluid rhythms, anti-rhetorical style, conversational tone and eminently colloquial language. Thus the possible difficulty in

understanding some texts results not from the lexical and semantic register being used, but from the zone of experience or reality explored in the poem.)

How, then, do we weigh the “notorias excepciones” against this supposed norm? In this paragraph, García Jambriña himself names four out of the eight poets in his own anthology as at least partial exceptions to his generalization. A fifth, Francisco Brines, is seldom colloquial in the true sense of the term.

Counting the number of poets who do or do not use “ordinary language” will not work, since there is no objective way of drawing up a list in the first place. There is yet another factor to consider: since the late 1970s, it becomes increasingly apparent that there are two main tendencies in the poetry of this group, with very different, even contradictory approaches to language. The first, represented by Ángel González and Jaime Gil de Biedma, along with José Agustín Goytisolo, Gloria Fuertes, and a few others, corresponds more or less to the image of the “Generation” that literary historians have settled upon. These are poets closely identified with social poetry and with the realist tradition of the 1950s. It is to this group that the idea of “ordinary language,” with several significant qualifications, can be applied. The second group, consisting of Claudio Rodríguez, José Manuel Caballero Bonald, Carlos Barral, Francisco Brines, José Ángel Valente, Antonio Gamoneda, and Ángel Crespo, among others, are those who marked their distance from social poetry at an earlier date, or who never participated in this movement in the first place. Because of the way in which this cohort of poets has been defined by literary history, the first group will inevitably seem more *generational* than the second, even though, in my view, it is the second group that best embodies the ideal of poetry as *conocimiento*. As I will demonstrate below, this key concept usually entails an outright abandonment of realist poetics—including the use of so-called ordinary language—rather than the subtle transcendence of an only *apparent* realism.

What of the poetry that *appears* to adhere most closely to the norm of ordinary language? A close analysis of the styles of the most significant poets of this tendency—González and Gil de Biedma—will reveal that the use of everyday language is more of an ideological *desideratum* than a statistical norm. Critics have seen colloquialism where they want to, but even styles reputed to be ordinary are self-consciously “literary,” often in a quite obvious way. What is more, there is really no such thing as “ordinary language” *tout court*: there are only multiple varieties of spoken and written language reflecting differences of region, social class, register, and tone.

One of Debicki’s concerns in *Poetry of Discovery* is to distinguish the “Generation of 1956–1971” both from the social poets—whose use of “ordinary” language lacked creativity—as well as from the Generation of 1927, whose language was more self-consciously literary. As a consequence, his definition of the ordinariness of ordinary (or seemingly ordinary) language is *negative*. He

defines it, that is, for what it is *not*: a specifically literary language or "poetic diction." Defined in terms of what it *is*, "ordinary language" is much harder to pin down. *Colloquial, everyday, vernacular, prosaic, conversational, ordinary, demotic*: these words appear to mean more or less the same thing. A more nuanced view of the question, however, would introduce several meaningful distinctions. Ordinary language might be defined by (a) *austerity*, avoidance of poetic ornament; (b) *orality*, closeness to speech as opposed to writing, whether in register, tone, or syntactic pattern; (c) *neutrality*, lack of distinctive markers of register; (d) *banality*, or ordinariness in a pejorative sense; or (e) *ease of comprehension* (the broadest of these categories). While these terms overlap to some extent, they are not identical. Truly colloquial language, for example, is rarely neutral or uninflected in tone. By the same token, language can be easily comprehensible without being either colloquial in register or particularly austere.⁵

Some concrete examples might help to clarify some of these distinctions. All employ language that some critics might call ordinary. But they are not ordinary in the same way or to the same extent:

Yo sé que existo
 porque tú me imaginas.
 Soy alto porque tú me crees
 alto, y limpio porque me miras
 con mirada limpia. (González 19)

(I know that I exist
 because you imagine me.
 I am tall because you believe me
 tall, and clean because you look on me
 with a clean gaze.)

González's simplicity is not derived from ordinary speech, but from the "pure poetry" of Pedro Salinas and Juan Ramón Jiménez. The conceptual play between the speaker of this poem and the female beloved is reminiscent of *La voz a ti debida*, although the gender roles are not defined in identical fashion. The pared-down style, likewise, owes much to Salinas's essentialism: note the way the relationship between the speaker and the addressee is defined through the use of pronouns rather than through an anecdotal situation.

Francisco Brines's style also appears to be relatively uncomplicated, but is noticeably more elevated in tone:

Lento voy con la tarde
 meditando un recuerdo
 de mi vida, ya sólo
 y para siempre mío.
 Y en el ciprés, que es muerte,
 reclino el cuerpo, miro

la superficie blanca
de los muros, y sueño. (Brines 17)

(I walk slowly with the evening
meditating on a memory
of my life, now only
and forever mine.

And in the cypress, which is death,
I recline my body, I regard
the white surface
of the wall, and dream.)

The style is sober, unadorned, yet the vocabulary and tone remain formal. “Reclino el cuerpo,” for example, is not the normal way of saying “lying down” in Spanish. The short lyrics of the later Luis Cernuda, often forgotten in favor of the dramatic monologues, are written in a similar mode. Brines’s tone and language is also quite close to the meditative poetry of Antonio Machado.

José Ángel Valente’s poetry, from his first book to his last, is extremely austere. The influence of both Cernuda and Blas de Otero is evident in his earliest published poems:

Parece que he gastado
la vida.
Ni una lágrima
cae
ni una palabra, como
si todo hubiese sido consumado. (Valente 16)

(It seems that I have wasted
my life.
Not a single tear
falls
not one word, as if
everything had been consummated.)

This stripped-down style reflects Valente’s insistence on sobriety and concision. Like Brines, he favors a fairly elevated register, except in certain satirical poems. No other contemporary Spanish poet has insisted so much on the fundamental distinction between poetic and non-poetic uses of language. This might seem paradoxical, since he himself does not employ an especially complex vocabulary. For Valente, however, poetic language is not more ornate than everyday speech, but more spare. He favors a Mallarmean purification of language, rather than a *modernista* or baroque proliferation. As a consequence, his poetic language differs from everyday speech not in its greater complexity, but precisely in its austere simplicity. Valente’s language is rarely colloquial in the true sense of the word.

Jaime Gil de Biedma's characteristic style is very different from that of either Brines or Valente:

En la vieja ciudad
 llena de niños góticos, en donde diminutas
 confiterías peregrinas
 ejercen el oficio del placer furtivo
 y se bebe cerveza en lugares sagrados
 por el uso del tiempo, aunque quizá es más dulce
 pasearse a lo largo del río ... (Gil de Biedma 55)

(In the old city
 full of gothic children, where diminutive
 wandering confectioners
 exercise the profession of furtive pleasure
 and beer is drunk in places made sacred
 by the usage of time, although it is sweeter perhaps
 to stroll the length of the river...)

There is indeed a conversational *tone* in Gil de Biedma's poetry; yet who, in an actual conversation, would think of saying something like "en donde diminutas / confiterías peregrinas / ejercen el oficio del placer furtivo"? I am not even sure what Gil de Biedma is referring to here: why are the children "góticos," and what exactly are "diminutas confiterías peregrinas"? (Are these "vendedores ambulantes de dulces," or something else?) The adjective-noun-adjective pattern has a literary ring to it—it is a particular favorite of Vicente Aleixandre—while the lexicon is *culto*, if not *rebuscado*. Deft line-breaks and metrical irregularity lend the passage a sort of casual elegance. (The "broken" thirteen-syllable *alejandrino* of the fourth line of this passage is typical of Gil de Biedma.) The resulting style is "conversational" in the broadest sense, but does not conceal its literary pedigree or its class affiliation: the speaker of the poem is a highly educated, urbane, and affluent poet like Gil de Biedma himself, and the linguistic patterns call to mind polished literary writing rather than colloquial speech. Gil de Biedma is not always this "literary," but similar examples can be found in other poems as well.

The literary languages of these poets, then, are defined by a relatively austere but still elevated diction modeled not on everyday or colloquial speech, but on the poets of the Generation of 1927, especially Salinas, Cernuda, and Aleixandre. Even Gil de Biedma, the poet most identified with the period style of the 1950s and 1960s, writes in an idiom that betrays its literariness at nearly every turn of phrase, despite its often prosaic tone. It would also be easy, of course, to find examples of less elevated language in these writers, although Brines rarely descends below a certain linguistic register. The problem lies in seeing "ordinary language" as a defining characteristic of the group as a whole. I

would prefer to see the various forms of what might called ordinary language—colloquialism, the language of written prose, bureaucratic jargon, sparseness and concision—as linguistic registers available to poets of this period, rather than as a single dominant mode of writing. Gil de Biedma’s use of words like *pelmazo* and *cacaseno* in “Contra Jaime Gil de Biedma,” for example, is effective because they belong to a different register than most of the other words in Gil de Biedma’s poetic opus:

De qué sirve, quisiera yo saber, cambiar de piso,
dejar atrás un sótano más negro
que mi reputación—y ya es decir—,
poner visillos blancos
y tomar criada,
renunciar a la vida de bohemio,
si vienes luego tú, *pelmazo*,
embarazoso huésped, memo vestido con mis trajes,
zángano de colmena, inútil, cacaseno,
con tus manos lavadas,
a comer en mi plato y a ensuciar la casa? (145; emphasis added)

(What good would it do, I’d like to know, to change apartments,
leave behind a basement blacker than my reputation (that’s saying a lot)
put in white curtains
and hire a maid,
renounce the bohemian life,
if you come along again, hanger-on,
embarrassing guest, cretin dressed in my suits,
drone of the bee-hive, useless, shit-for-brains,
with your washed hands,
to eat off my plate and dirty the house?)

It would be foolish to deny the presence of various forms of “ordinary language” in Spanish poetry of the period in question. These poets rarely confine themselves to a single mode or register, whether colloquial, neutral, or literary. The problem is that the concept of “ordinary language” is not suggestive of the richness and variety of language use, both in literature and in life. The term becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, flattening out and erasing stylistic differences, or deflecting attention away from the language of the poem.

Why, then, do critics label this self-consciously literary language “ordinary” or “colloquial”? Why, in other words, do they mischaracterize language as belonging to a lower register than it really does, or minimize the importance of self-consciously literary styles wherever these are found? The main source of this misreading is ideological. The poetry of the young writers of the 1950s was originally seen as a continuation of social poetry. José María Castellet bears much of the responsibility for this perception, since his landmark anthology

Veinte años de poesía española valued collective effort rather than individual achievement, realism rather than symbolism. The poets of the "Escuela de Barcelona" (Gil de Biedma, J. A. Goytisolo, Barral) close associates of Castellet, were propagating the aesthetics of social realism circa 1960, even though their own work fits very uneasily within this category. They even had a hand in the writing of the introduction. Castellet organized his anthology by year rather than by poet: it is thus difficult for the reader to discern individual voices, or to recognize the significance of extraordinary or "exceptional" poets like Claudio Rodríguez or Jaime Gil de Biedma himself.

Social realism, of course, is ultimately derived from *socialist* realism, the official literary doctrine of the Soviet Union (and the Communist Party) beginning in the 1930s. Castellet's anthology, then, toed a strict party line. As Carme Riera has described it,

La *Antología* [*Veinte años de poesía española*], que constituye, en el fondo, un viejo proyecto desde los tiempos de *Laye*, a cargo de Castellet y con un extenso prólogo introductorio, aparece en 1960 y cumple con creces con sus intenciones: rechaza cualquier tipo de creación que no se avenga con los presupuestos marxistas, con los que entonces comulga el crítico. (19)

(The *Anthology*, which is essentially an old project from the days of *Laye*, entrusted to Castellet and with a long introductory prologue, appears in 1960 and fulfills its goals to the maximum extent: it rejects any type of creation that is not in accordance with Marxist precepts, with which the critic is in communion at that time.)

Since this anthology served, in essence, to launch this group of poets as an official "generation," it is no wonder that some literary historians have had a difficult time distinguishing the young poets of the 1950s from the "social poets" of the previous generation. Social realism remained the quasi-official doctrine of the Spanish *intelligentsia* until the middle or late 1960s, even though the most significant poets of this period had long since seen its limitations.

Subsequent critics seek to correct this vision by emphasizing the originality of the younger poets, those who began to publish in the 1950s. From my perspective, however, they concede far too much by continuing to emphasize the ordinary or "everyday" character of this poetry, its roots in the realist tradition. Debicki, for example, often argues that a given poem merely *seems* to be realistic or anecdotal, but ultimately transcends its apparent ordinariness. From a later vantage point, however, it becomes evident that a great deal of the most valuable poetry of this period does not answer to this description in the first place. What is more, the poets most likely to view poetry as a process of *conocimiento* are the ones whose poetic language is furthest removed from the ideologically imposed norm of ordinary language. In other words, viewing poetry as a process of knowledge almost always entails reintroducing the distinction between ordinary and literary language in some form or another.

Valente's evolution, from the late 1960s through the development of his mystical style in the early 1980s, is paradigmatic of this tendency: the more he explores poetry as a means of knowledge, the less "ordinary" his language becomes. By the 1980s the bifurcation of this so-called generation is complete: the stereotypically "realist" poetry of the 1950s and 1960s (especially Gil de Biedma and González) provides the model for the "poetry of experience" of the 1980s. Valente, situated in the opposite camp, becomes a fierce opponent of this neorealism, based, in his view at least, on the least interesting aspect of his own "generation."

Ultimately, it is questionable whether the idea of poetry as *conocimiento* is compatible with the tenets of social realism, which, of course, emphasized *comunicación*. How, then, could poets who were capable of extremely sophisticated theoretical reflection on the poetic process (as seen in early essays by both Gil de Biedma and Barral), give credence to Castellet's orthodox Marxist precepts? Compare Barral's denunciation of social poetry in his 1953 essay "Poesía no es comunicación" to a statement made only a few years later:

La teoría de poesía como comunicación constituye, cuando se formula científicamente, una simplificación peligrosa del proceso y el hecho poético, simplificación que desconoce la autonomía del momento creativo, en el que nace un estado psíquico determinante del poema (de tal modo que nada impide que el poeta lo descubra en el poema mismo) y que prescinde de un tipo de poesía que exige del lector un proceso de acercamiento al poema, al que ha de cargar de sentido, a costa de su propio mundo interior. (qtd. in Riera 67)

(The theory of poetry as communication constitutes, when formulated as a scientific principle, a dangerous simplification of the poetic process and result, a simplification that ignores the autonomy of the creative moment, in which a psychic state determining the poem is born (in such a way that nothing stops the poet from discovering it in the poem itself) and [this theory of poetry as communication] has no use for a type of poetry that demands from the reader a process of approaching the poem, which the reader must charge with meaning, at the expense of his or her own interior world.)

Me declaro partidario de una poética realista según las indicaciones de Brecht, es decir, de una poesía en cuyos planteamientos temáticos se revelen los nexos casuales de la sociedad, se tenga en cuenta que los puntos de vista dominantes coincidan con los de los dominadores, se parta de un punto de vista de clase, etc. En cuanto al estilo y a los problemas de forma, me declaro—por motivos que tienen sobre todo relación con la historia reciente de la poesía española—partidario de la prudencia de los efectos verbales, de la economía de bellos versos y, en general, del *atrezzo lírico*, partidario de *los poemas de tono narrativo y un poco gris* y, en compensación, del rigor estructural y la invención formal. (qtd. in Riera 33; emphasis added.)

(I declare myself a partisan of a realist poetics according to the precepts of Brecht, in other words, a poetry whose thematic approaches reveal the causal connections

of society, [in which] it is recognized that the dominant perspectives are those of the dominators, [in which] the point of departure is class, etc. As for style and formal problems, I declare myself (for reasons having to do above all with the recent history of Spanish poetry) a partisan of restraint in the use of verbal effects, of the sparing use of beautiful verse and, in general, of lyric *atrezzo*, a partisan of poems of a narrative, slightly gray tone, and, to compensate, of structural rigor and formal invention.)

The simplest answer is that Marxism was the official ideology of the intellectual opposition to the Franco régime: most of the important writers of the period were either Communist Party members or *compañeros de viaje*. (Gil de Biedma even used this phrase as the title of his 1959 collection of poems.) It was thus impossible for the poets of the school of Barcelona to launch themselves as a new generation by *condemning* simplistic notions of communication, as both Gil de Biedma and Barral had done in earlier essays, or even by ignoring the entire debate. As the second quotation from Barral makes clear, the ideal of a "gray," anecdotal style forms part of the ideology of social realism. Bertold Brecht's ideas, of course, are far from simplistic, and cannot be identified with social or socialist realism. In this paragraph, however, Barral does not seem to be aware of this discrepancy, since he associates Brecht's name with a comparatively reductive version of Marxist literary theory. By the same token, the *critical* realism of these poets marks a departure from the social poetry of Blas de Otero. Yet Castellet's anthology, by emphasizing communal goals rather than individual achievement, tends to blur this difference.

Seen in this light, the publication of *Veinte años de poesía española* in 1960 constitutes an outright *interruption* of the development of a generational poetics based on the notion of *conocimiento*. Carme Riera is without a doubt the critic who has studied these questions with the most care. She views the adhesion of these poets to the principles of social realism as both temporary and somewhat opportunistic:

Para el entonces joven crítico catalán [Castellet] la única literatura válida y moderna era la que rechazaba la tradición simbolista y se basaba en las premisas del realismo crítico que resumía machadaniamente en "objetividad y fraternidad," según consta en las páginas de su introducción a *Veinte años de poesía española* (1960), en cuya confección participaron activamente Carlos Barral, Jaime Gil de Biedma y José Agustín Goytisolo, entre la primavera y el otoño de 1959, momentáneamente convertidos a los postulados críticos de Castellet y, sobre todo, convencidos de las ventajas que aquella conjunta maniobra de taller iba a suponerles para su posterior reconcimientto. (Riera 32; emphasis added).

(For the then-young Catalan literary critic [Castellet], the only valid modern literature was that which rejected the symbolist tradition and was based on the premises of critical realism, which he summarized, after Machado, as "objectivity and fraternity." This is evident in the introduction to *Veinte años de poesía española*

(1960), in the writing of which Carlos Barral, Jaime Gil de Biedma and José Agustín Goytisolo actively participated between spring and autumn of 1959, momentarily converted to Castellet's critical postulates and convinced, above all, of the advantages that this group effort would bring for their future recognition.)

Ironically, this combination of temporary ideological commitment and sheer careerism might have done more to *delay* the recognition of these poets in all their individuality. Carlos Barral, under the influence of Castellet, abandoned the style of *Metropolitano*, but soon returned to a more linguistically dense mode (Riera 32–34). Even José Agustín Goytisolo, the poet who submitted his work most directly to “las directrices de la poesía social” (the directives of social poetry) attempted to distance himself from this movement, going as far as to suppress in later editions of his poetic works “los versos más comprometidos” (the most committed lines) (Riera 34). As for Jaime Gil de Biedma, who had been denied entrance to the Communist Party because of his homosexuality, it is doubtful that he gained any professional advantage by supporting an aesthetic based on collective rather than individual principles.⁶ He would have been recognized as a significant poet in any event.

Lurking behind the ideal of “ordinary language” is an ideological phantom: the imaginary *speaking subject* of such a language, the proletarian actor of Marxist theory. It should perhaps come as no surprise that the Barcelona poets, who belonged to the cosmopolitan Catalan bourgeoisie, did not even attempt to mimic proletarian language. They were, in Gil de Biedma well-known formulation, “señoritos por nacimiento / por mala conciencia escritores / de poesía social” (*señoritos* by birth / by guilty conscience writers / of social poetry) (78).

Carlos Barral's “Baño de doméstica” demonstrates some of the potential pitfalls of this situation. The speaker of the poem relives his childhood voyeurism, his experience of watching a female servant taking a bath. At the end of the poem he attempts to link this erotic image, transformed into a mythological archetype by the adult speaker, to the imminent triumph of the working class:

Su espléndido desnudo,
al que las ramas rendían homenaje,
admitiré que sea
nada más que un recuerdo esteticista.
Pero me gustaría ser más joven
para poder imaginar
(pensando en la inminencia de otra cosa)
que era el vigor del pueblo soberano. (Barral 120–21)

(Her splendid nude body,
to which the branches paid homage,
I will admit is
nothing more than an aestheticist memory.
But I would like to be younger

so as to be able to imagine
 (thinking of the imminence of something else)
 that it is the vigor of the sovereign people.)

Yet this link is expressed in a qualified and ultimately (to my mind at least) unconvincing way. For one thing, the speaker's attempt to distance himself from his own aestheticism is undermined by the effects of his own poetic language. The highly literary language, along with deftly concealed mythological allusions (Diana's bath, the birth of Venus), make it virtually certain that the woman depicted in the poem, or any other like her, will not be able to read the poem. The result is an extreme form of cognitive dissonance, almost a Brechtian alienation-effect in reverse. Carme Riera comments on these concluding lines in a perceptive footnote that is worth quoting at length:

El desnudo de la sirvienta se asimila al vigor del pueblo, quizá porque la República se representaba por una matrona. "La inminencia de otra cosa" entre paréntesis es, claro, la llegada de la libertad de la siempre esperada revolución antifranquista. La asimilación de conceptos es, sin duda, producto de una confusión ideológica peligrosa si el poema, como parece[,] fue escrito en serio, sin ánimo de envolver en sarcasmo al sujeto poético capaz de manifestarlo, pese a que va matizado con el "me gustaría ser más joven." El poema considerado como ejemplo válido del realismo crítico fue publicado por Castellet en su antología *Veinte años de poesía española* [...] (Barral 121)

(The nudity of the servant is assimilated into the vigor of the people, perhaps because the Republic was represented by a matron. "The imminence of something else" in parentheses is, of course, the arrival of freedom in the perpetually awaited anti-Franco revolution. The assimilation of concepts is, without a doubt, the result of a dangerous ideological confusion, if the poem was (as it appears it was) written seriously, without the intention of making the poetic speaker capable of sarcasm, despite the qualification of the phrase "I'd like to be younger." This poem, considered a valid example of critical realism, was published by Castellet in his anthology *Veinte años de poesía española*.)

What makes the ending of this poem ring so false, in my reading, is that the bourgeois sexual fantasy of the domestic servant is simply replaced with an *equally* aestheticized bourgeois politico-sexual fantasy of the proletarian woman. The object of desire is transformed into an allegorical female nude, a kitschy statuette representing the power of the people. The speaker, moreover, never stops to examine the class (and gender) dynamic operating between himself and the female object of his male, upper-middle-class gaze: cultural, gender, and class hierarchies are left wholly intact. It is hard to imagine an era when this sort of poetry could be accepted as a legitimate expression of Marxist realism, or when a limp and vague phrase like "la inminencia de otra cosa" could carry such subversive weight.

If the poets of the 1950s did not in fact write in a primarily “realistic” or “colloquial” manner, there is no reason to say that their works only *seem* to be anecdotal poems written in ordinary language. Of course, there are many poems ostensibly written under the sway of social realism that in fact transcend the party line, but it seems perverse to emphasize the predominance of the anecdotal and the ordinary when some of the best minds of this generation were bucking this trend as early as 1953, the date of both Barral’s “Poesía no es comunicación” and Rodríguez’s *Don de la ebriedad*. Why single out a narrow band of poetry—that which employs a restricted range of vocabulary—rather than considering the entire range of styles, from Fuertes’s colloquialism to Barral’s and Caballero Bonald’s neo-baroque?

The shift in perspective that I have proposed in this chapter makes it much easier to see the continuity of Spanish poetry, from the Generation of 1927 through the *novísimos* of the 1970s. The connections between Jorge Guillén and Carlos Barral, Pedro Salinas and Ángel González, become much more obvious. Working in the opposite direction, we can link Gil de Biedma with Guillermo Carnero, or Claudio Rodríguez and José Ángel Valente with Pere Gimferrer. What has obscured these connections in the past is the notion that the poets of the 1950s eschew literary language altogether in favor of a colloquial ideal. The idea of a poetic use of otherwise undistinguished language is seductive because it serves to differentiate the poets of the 1950s from the Generation of 1927 as well as from the *novísimos*. The price of this differentiation, however, is that it becomes more difficult to see these poets in the context of poetic modernity.

It is in this light that we must re-evaluate the crucial concept of *conocimiento*. For Debicki, this is an innovative aspect of the poetics of the 1950s. By way of contrast, he sees modernist poetics in surprisingly static terms:

This view of the poem as an act of discovery not only contradicted the facile definition of poetry as message that had been prevalent in Spain but also undermined a long-standing modern poetics of the literary work. It denied the notion of a *determined, previously existent meaning* embodied in the work. (*Spanish Poetry of the Twentieth Century* 101; emphasis added)

If modernist poetry were defined by the communication of predetermined meanings, however, there would be little to differentiate it from the “facile definition of poetry as message”! The binary opposition between symbolism and realism, the basis of Castellet’s defense of social poetry, would be nearly meaningless. But, of course, it is impossible to imagine Mallarmé sitting down to write a poem with a predetermined meaning already fully shaped in his mind, one that the reader would be able to extract at a later date: poems are made, not with *ideas*, but with *words*, as he famously remarked. The autonomy of the creative act is a central principle of Symbolist as well as of modernist and avant-garde poetics, especially the Surrealist movement.⁷ Jaime Gil de

Biedma quotes T. S. Eliot, the most canonical poet of High Modernism, in order to refute the notion that meaning exists prior to the act of writing: "lo que el poeta experimenta no es la poesía, sino el material poético: escribir un poema es una experiencia original; la lectura de ese poema por el autor u otra persona es cosa distinta" ("Poesía y comunicación"; Riera 70). A more elegant refutation of Carlos Bousoño's theory that the poet communicates a predetermined emotional state to the reader would be hard to find.⁸

It is important to stress that when the poets of the 1950s insisted on the autonomy of writing (and of reading), they were not breaking with the modern poetic tradition, but reconnecting with it. They felt the need to emphasize this principle because of the dominance of the communicative model at the time they began writing. This communicative model, furthermore, was not a *simplification* of a modernist poetics of determinate meaning, but an ideologically motivated *rejection* of poetic modernity. Debicki's assertion of a continuity between modernism and social poetry, then, is profoundly counterintuitive:

We could say that many prior modes of writing—the modernist icon, the Falangist manifesto, the social poem—all had in common the goal of conveying meanings that must be received as they are intended. They all have to be read within their frame of authority. (*Spanish Poetry of the Twentieth Century* 104)

In the most general sense, of course, no literary text can be understood in the absence of some "frame of authority." Even the most open text does not permit an infinite number of interpretations. In this sense, a poem by Claudio Rodríguez does not differ fundamentally from a poem by Jorge Guillén. At the same time, however, both of these poets remain open to contradictory readings in a way that a piece of pure propaganda presumably would not.

The poetic trajectories of several key figures of this group, I believe, cannot be understood if we posit a break with the poetics of modernity. In his later work, José Ángel Valente returns again and again to the "great moderns"—from Mallarmé and Juan Ramón Jiménez to Joyce, Kafka, Celan, Beckett, and Jabès. Valente sees himself, in essence, as the "last modernist": I doubt he would have seen his own work as a break with the fundamental tenets of the tradition for which he himself was the most vociferous champion! One could make the same argument about Antonio Gamoneda, Ángel Crespo, Carlos Barral, or Francisco Brines. These poets are steeped in the modernist tradition of Cavafy, Rilke, Char, and Pessoa. None, as far as I know, has expressed interest in breaking with the adventure initiated in the early years of the twentieth century. As social realism faded into memory in the closing years of the century, the poetic language of this group—never as humdrum as critics have claimed—grew even richer and more variegated. In their search for poetic *conocimiento*, these poets could not be confined within the limits of "ordinary language." Looking back to the linguis-

tically dense poetry written by Barral, Rodríguez, and Caballero Bonald in the early 1950s, we can see that it is not an exception to be discounted, but rather a harbinger of the ultimate development of this extraordinary group of poets.

Notes

- 1 Other names often included in studies and anthologies of this period are Jaime Gil de Biedma, Carlos Barral, José Agustín Goytisolo, Ángel González, Francisco Brines, José Manuel Caballero Bonald, Carlos Sahagún, and Eladio Cabañero. María Victoria Atencia and Antonio Gamoneda, poets of the same age-group who are usually left out of “generational” accounts, gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. A full list of Spanish poets of this “generation” or “promotion” would also include Ángel Crespo, Gloria Fuertes, and numerous other, less canonical figures. Fuertes is considered part of this group by North American Hispanists, although usually not in Spain. Although I give little credence to the concept of a literary generation, I find that I must accept the convention that groups these poets together if I am to engage in dialogue with previous critics.
 - 2 Several extraordinary books by these authors were published between 1975 and 1977. *Insistencias en Luzbel* (Brines), *El vuelo de la celebración* (Rodríguez), *Descrédito del héroe* (Caballero Bonald), *Marta & María* (Atencia), *Descripción de la mentira* (Gamoneda), *Muestra de algunos procedimientos narrativos y de las actitudes sentimentales que habitualmente comportan* (González). Many of these books break long silences or represent new departures for their respective authors. The generational model would predict that the *novísimos* would be the central poets of this period, but this movement had already lost steam by the mid-seventies.
 - 3 Debicki’s influence is most evident in Margaret Persin’s *Recent Spanish Poetry and the Role of the Reader* and in articles too numerous to mention written by students from his NEH Seminars. My disagreement with Debicki on many substantive issues in no way implies a lack of personal respect for my late colleague and friend. Useful information and critical perspectives on these poets can be found in Jiménez, Provencio, and Riera. For up-to-date bibliography on individual authors, as well as the group as a whole, see García Jambrina’s excellent anthology.
 - 4 Debicki translates *conocimiento* as “discovery,” arguing that this concept refers more to a process of discovery rather than to a special form of knowledge. I understand the reasoning, but *discovery* still sounds too facile to my ears. The Spanish word *conocimiento*, as Valente use the word, implies a deeper, more creative process. *Conocimiento* implies more than *descubrimiento*.
 - 5 The term *colloquial* is itself ambiguous, since it can refer either to expressions which would seem out of place in formal settings, or simply to language that belongs to a neutral, unmarked register: “Are you going to the concert tonight?” By the broadest possible definition, the language of the opening stanza of Jorge Guillén’s “Más allá” would be colloquial, since no native speaker of Spanish would need to look any words up in a dictionary:

El alma vuelve al cuerpo,
Se dirige a los ojos
Y choca.) —¡Luz! Me invade
Todo mi ser. ¡Asombro! (Guillén 17)
- My point is that the context in which we read influences the way in which we perceive language. Gil de Biedma’s “colloquial” language is often more complex than Guillén’s “literary” language.

- 6 I concur with García Jambrina's view: "[...] para estos autores la asunción de un determinado compromiso social es—salvo períodos excepcionales, y no en todos—independiente de su ejercicio poético. Es, no obstante, el cultivo de una determinada poesía circunstancial lo que más los identifica, en un primer momento, como grupo" (46).
- 7 As Umberto Eco pointed out in a work first published forty years ago, Mallarmé's Symbolist poetics, with its emphasis on suggestion, constitutes "a deliberate move to 'open' the work to the free response of the addressee. An artistic work that suggests is also one that can be performed with the full emotional and imaginative resources of the interpreter. Whenever we read poetry there is a process by which we try to adapt our personal world to the emotional world proposed by the text. This is all the more true of poetic works that are deliberately based on suggestiveness, since the text sets out to stimulate the private world of the addressee so that he can draw from inside himself some deeper response that mirrors the subtler resonances underlying the text" (Eco 9).
- 8 Debicki relies on New-Critical principles, many of which have their ultimate source in T. S. Eliot's literary criticism, to define modernist poetics. In my view, however, he makes a crucial misstep. If meaning is truly embodied in the poem, as Cleanth Brooks famously argues in "The Heresy of Paraphrase," then it cannot logically be "previously existent." The text is autonomous and its meaning cannot be *paraphrased*, that is, considered apart from its concrete linguistic embodiment. By the same token, meaning cannot predate this embodiment either. This is the notorious "intentional fallacy": the meaning of the poem cannot be derived from a previously intended meaning in the author's mind (Wimsatt and Beardsley). It is true that the poets of the 1950s emphasize the autonomy of the creative act rather than the autonomy of the text. Yet they are not intentionalists either: they see the process of reading as autonomous in its own right. Debicki's stress on *meaning*, in any case, is at odds with the modernist imperative that "A poem should not mean / but be."

CHAPTER FIVE

José Ángel Valente's *Lectura de Paul Celan*: Translation and the Heideggerian Tradition in Spain

Escribir es como la segregación de las resinas; no es acto, sino lenta formación natural. Musgo, humedad, arcillas, limo, fenómenos del fondo, y no del sueño o de los sueños, sino de los barro oscuros donde las figuras de los sueños fermentan. Escribir no es hacer, sino aposentarse, estar. (Valente, *Material memoria* 115)

(Writing is like the secretion of resins; it is not an act, but a slow natural formation. Moss, humidity, clays, mire, phenomena of the depths, and not of sleep or of dreams, but of the dark soils where the figure of dreams ferment. To write is not to act, but to settle, to be.)

The career of José Ángel Valente (1929–2000) took shape slowly and organically over the course of several decades. As he himself suggests in this prose-poem from *Mandorla*, his writing is an unhurried process of development analogous to the formation of natural substances. Ultimately, the process by which his work assumed its definitive identity, especially in the final two decades of his life, was both prolonged and coherent, yielding a poetic work of enormous seriousness and depth.

Valente emerged in the 1950s as one of several poets subsequently included by literary historians in the so-called “Generation of the 1950s.” However, in the 1980s, during Spain’s transition to democracy, he increasingly distanced himself from his generational contemporaries. At the time of his death on July 18, 2000, he was identified primarily as the standard-bearer of a belated although still very powerful “High Modernist” tradition in Spanish poetry.¹ The shift from the socially oriented poetry of his first books to the “essentialist” modernism of the 1980s and 1990s took place gradually, in a series of books published in the 1960s and 1970s, so that it is impossible to establish a clear line of demarcation between the early and the late Valente. It is clear, however, that Valente’s unique role within recent Spanish poetry was to be the intellectual leader of those poets championing the belated avant-garde/modernist tradition in contemporary Spain.

In this role, Valente became a fierce and intransigent critic of the so-called “poetry of experience” of the 1980s—a movement purporting to revive the

"realist" poetics of Valente's own generation, and even, as its alternate name "nueva sentimentalidad" suggests, those of the towering figure of Spanish modernism: Antonio Machado. According to poet Juan Bonilla,

Se distinguió Valente, el último Valente, por una desabrida y violenta denuncia de la perezosamente denominada poesía de la experiencia, acusando a los poetas principales de esta tendencia de ser representantes del Poder y la Oficialidad, caricaturizando sus versos y rebajándoles la calidad con opiniones contundentes que parecían proceder más del rencor que de un examen ajustado de sus obras. (5)²

(Valente, the late Valente, was notable for a harsh and violent denunciation of what is lazily called the poetry of experience, accusing the main poets of this tendency of being representatives of power and officialdom, caricaturing their poetry, and denigrating their quality with extreme opinions that seemed to stem more from rancour than from a judicious examination of their works.)

While Valente's later poetry is genuinely powerful, I would contend that his public role as defender of High Modernist standards is at least as significant as his actual poetic works in establishing his pre-eminent position. Claudio Rodríguez is arguably a more gifted poet than Valente; yet Rodríguez was not inclined (or able) to become an influential literary critic or public intellectual. Valente, by contrast, developed a coherent (almost single-minded) and intransigent poetic philosophy that won him a small but unified group of adherents, along with a host of enemies. The same intransigence decried by Bonilla and other supporters of poetic "realism" was a quality to be admired by poets and intellectuals like Jaime Siles and Juan Goytisolo. Goytisolo and Valente, in fact, tend to employ an almost identical "take-no-prisoners" tone in their public pronouncements. Valente's career is closely parallel to that of Goytisolo. Both men came to see themselves as intellectual lone wolves on the margins of literary and political institutions.³ Both lived large portions of their adult lives outside of Spain, and identified completely with the Spanish traditions of exile and dissent, which go as far back as to José María Blanco White (self-banished in England in 1810 and soon converted to Anglicanism) and the circle of liberal intellectuals (e.g., Antonio Alcalá Galiano, Ángel de Saavedra [Duke of Rivas], José de Espronceda) who followed him shortly afterwards, during the so-called Ominous Decade of Spanish absolutism (1823–1833). It is difficult to evaluate the positions adopted by such figures without taking into account the rhetorical vehemence at work in their writings, which is at the same time *necessary* and *contradictory*: the prophetic tone is inherent in the message; yet intransigence implies a dogmatism that is at odds with the anti-dogmatic spirit these writers claim to represent.

What exactly, then, is the poetic tradition with which Valente identified himself? It would be easy to establish the connections between Valente and

European writers like Paul Celan, Samuel Beckett, Edmond Jabès, and René Char, or fellow Spaniards like María Zambrano, Juan Goytisolo, and Antonio Gamoneda, the subject of Chapter 6. Valente also admired Cuban poet José Lezama Lima, and enjoyed a close friendship with Catalan painter Antoni Tàpies.⁴ The writers in Valente's pantheon reflect a particular understanding of the poetic tradition, one that has its roots in German Romanticism and that conceives of poetry in philosophical terms, as a form of thinking, rather than as a genre of mere "literature." One key to understanding this tradition is Maurice Blanchot, who, beginning in the 1940s, synthesized German and French versions of poetic modernity. Blanchot was introduced to the works of Martin Heidegger before the Second World War by his friend, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Blanchot's enormously influential essays on key figures such as Mallarmé, Rilke, and Char employ distinctively Heideggerian concepts: "One of the greatneses of René Char, one that is unequalled in our time, is that his poetry is a revelation of poetry, poetry of poetry, and, as Heidegger almost says of Hölderlin, poem of the essence of the poem" (Blanchot 100).⁵

In the Spanish context, María Zambrano's essays are an indisputable point of reference for Valente as well. Zambrano's theory of "la razón poética," not coincidentally, is heavily indebted to Heidegger, as Chantal Maillard explains:

Al poeta le corresponde abrir, desentrañar aquel fondo de donde surge el ser: el lugar de lo sagrado. Por ello afirma Heidegger que el poeta habita cerca del origen. Los poetas señalan la apertura, "consagran el suelo," abren en la tierra el lugar común de lo sagrado, esto es, permiten la extrañeza y el asombro ante lo inexistente; y, por ello, su penetración: su acceso al ser. (51)

(The poet's task is to open, bring out into the open, those depths from which being arises: the place of the sacred. That is why Heidegger affirms that the poet dwells close to the origin. Poets signal the opening, they "consecrate the ground," they open in the earth the common place of the sacred, that is, they allow for strangeness and astonishment in the face of the nonexistent; and, therefore, its penetration: its access to being.)

It was not only her Heideggerianism, but also her interpretation of Spanish mysticism that influenced Valente. Zambrano does not herself reveal the full extent of her debt to Heidegger. In an article entitled "Apuntes sobre el lenguaje sagrado y las artes," for example, she explains the concept of *aletheia* as unveiling (or unconcealment) but fails to mention the German philosopher by name: she even concludes this essay by evoking Hölderlin (221–36). Such omissions are significant because they obscure the lines of transmission: Heideggerian ideas have permeated European thought, from the 1920s to the present day, to such a degree that a writer like Valente could have absorbed them from many sources, from Heidegger himself as well as from Spanish thinkers like Ortega y Gasset and Zambrano.

Valente, like Blanchot, is primarily a *synthesizer*, bringing together Zambrano's "razón poética" with the conception of poetry and the canon of writers that took shape in Blanchot's essays. His poetic achievement resides in a kind of distillation, or *translation*, of a Heideggerian tradition of poetic modernity, in a specifically Spanish context. This is not to minimize in any way the value of his poetry and essays: his reading of the mystical tradition is distinctive, and his later poetry—on which most of his stature depends—has already achieved canonical status. I am not totally convinced, however, that a European reader already familiar with the writers in Valente's pantheon would see Valente's own work as equally indispensable to the modern tradition of which he forms a part. Valente is not an originator of the modern tradition: he is, rather, the quintessential *late* modernist, putting the pieces together in brilliant but belated fashion.

Valente's connection to the German-language poet Paul Celan (1920–1970), while acknowledged in the critical literature, has yet to be explored in any depth or detail, despite the publication of *Lectura de Celan: fragmentos*, in 1993, and Claudio Rodríguez Fer's recent edition of Valente's complete translations.⁶ This neglect is surprising in light of Valente's open acknowledgment of his most significant literary affiliations: Paul Celan is undoubtedly one of the postwar European poets who best exemplifies Valente's own literary ideals.⁷ Valente's translations of Celan, along with his essays on the Jewish poet, provide the perfect test case for an examination of the way in which Valente attempts to assimilate the major texts of Heideggerian modernism into his own poetics, using them to bolster his own defense of poetry. More specifically, Valente uses his readings of Celan to work out an intellectual justification for his move away from the Sartrean *engagement* of the 1950s toward the poetic "essentialism" of his later work, grounded both in Spanish mysticism and the works of Heidegger.

Valente's inward turn in the 1980s, his seeming abandonment of socio-political commentary, poses a problem for critics of his poetry. Does his development of a poetics of the sacred simply supplant his earlier social engagement, or does his historical meditation take a different, less recognizable shape? What is the relation between the emphasis on the poet's usefulness, in Valente's earlier poetry, and his subsequent rejection of instrumental uses of language? *Lectura de Celan* provides some possible answers to these questions. Celan is a notoriously difficult poet, whose work often challenges the very possibility of poetic communication. Valente's reading of the Jewish poet, however, demonstrates that this apparent denial of communication points to a different model of dialogue, one that attempts to bridge the real gaps among radically different subjects. This acknowledgment of difference, then, provides an ethical and historical justification for conceptions of poetic language that are often characterized as simply "intransitive" or "hermetic."

According to Rodríguez Fer, Valente's first translations of Celan appeared in 1978 in the magazine *Poesía*: "El impacto de Celan en la poesía de Valente fue simultáneo al período de sus primeras versiones tal como evidencia, desde el título y desde el primer poema, su libro *Mandorla*, iniciado con una cita del autor rumano tomada precisamente de su poema 'Mandorla'" (The impact of Celan on Valente's poetry was simultaneous with the period of his first translations, as is evident in the title and first poem of his book *Mandorla*, which begins with a quote from the Romanian author taken precisely from his poem "Mandorla" (*Cuaderno de versiones* 21–22). Valente's translation of Celan thus coincides with his inward turn of the 1970s, evident in books like *Material memoria* (1979), *Tres lecciones de tinieblas* (1980), *La piedra y el centro* (1982), and *Mandorla* itself. This is an especially rich period in Valente's career. While his interest in mysticism is already evident in earlier works, like his edition of Miguel de Molinos (1974), it is in the late 1970s and early 1980s that he publishes the works that redefine him as a poet.⁸

The hermeneutic model that Valente finds in Celan brings him into the orbit of Heideggerian hermeneutics. In some sense, however, Valente was already under the influence of this body of thought before he read and translated Celan. Hölderlin's question "Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" (what are poets for in a destitute time?) frames an important group of poems in *La memoria y los signos* (1966). Heidegger had asked himself the same question in an essay on Hölderlin entitled "What are Poets for?" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 91–142). Valente, in the 1960s, contextualized this question in utilitarian terms, irreconcilable, perhaps, with the German philosopher's meditation on the essence of poetry. It is Celan who re-historicizes the Heideggerian ontological conception of poetry. In Celan's rebuttal to Adorno's notorious pronouncement that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, Valente finds confirmation for his own continued effort to justify the poet's "usefulness."

It is possible, of course, that Valente would have become a "Heideggerian" without Celan. His engagement with the hermeneutic tradition and with María Zambrano predates his translations of the Jewish poet, since his landmark essay "La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir" and his first essay on Zambrano were published in *Las palabras de la tribu* (1971). Valente had also read Blanchot and other writers influenced by Heidegger. I don't mean to imply that Celan provides Valente with the only possible route back to Heidegger, only that Valente himself uses Celan—along with Zambrano—as one of his points of entry. Heideggerian terms and concepts are ubiquitous in the critical discourse of Spanish poets and critics who champion Valente as the alternative to the realist discourse of the "poetry of experience." José Manuel Cuesta Abad's *Poesía y enigma*, for example, contains studies of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Borges, Celan, and Valente, along with theoretical reflections on the hermeneutic tradition. The journal *La alegría de los*

naufragios, edited by Amalia Iglesias and Galician poet César Antonio Molina, is devoted to the work of Valente and Gamoneda, and often includes Heideggerian essays by Cuesta Abad and like-minded critics and poets.

It is clear, then, that Valente is *affiliated* with other poets and critics within the Heideggerian orbit. More concretely, his work can be called Heideggerian in its insistence on the role of the *sacred*. In a well-known exegesis to which I cannot do justice here, the German philosopher explains Hölderlin's famous question—"Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?"—in terms of the poet's responsibility to forge a poetic language that will be the dwelling place of the sacred, in the wake of the gods' disappearance: "To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods" (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 94). This is the idea that underlies Valente's 1989 *Al dios del lugar*. After the death of the gods, the only sacred presence is an absence, the *deus absconditus* ("hidden God") of Isaiah 45:15. In the opening poem of this book, Valente evokes a communion rite in which the sacred presence has difficulty making itself known:

El vino tenía el vago color de la ceniza.
 Se bebía con un poso de sombra
 oscura, sombra, cuerpo
 mojado en las arenas.
 El insidioso fondo de la copa
 esconde a un dios incógnito.
 Me diste
 a beber sangre
 en esta noche.
 Fondo
 del dios bebido hasta las heces. (*Al dios del lugar* 14)
 (The wine was the vague color of ash.
 It was drunk with a sediment of shadow
 dark, shadow, body
 wet in the sands.
 The insidious bottom of the cup
 hides an unknown god.
 You gave me
 blood to drink
 in this night.
 Bottom
 of the god drunk down to the dregs.)

This is the task of a poet in a destitute time: to create a dwelling-place, in language, for this divine presence/absence, and thus reveal the truth of humanity's existence on the earth.⁹ The word *morada*, which occurs frequently in Valente's poetry and

is a master trope in Teresa de Ávila's mystical writings, resonates strongly with Heidegger's concept of "dwelling" (*Wohnen*) in "Building Dwelling Thinking" and "... Poetically Man Dwells" (*Poetry Language Thought* 143–62; 211–29).

While Valente's poetry is suffused with identifiable Heideggerian *themes*, I would argue that the presence of such *leitmotivs* is less significant than Valente's Heideggerian conception of the *hermeneutics* of poetry. The issue that Valente chooses to emphasize in the theoretical texts that accompany his versions of Celan's poems is the related issue of *communicability*. This is not communication, or the transmission of information, but rather the possibility of creating a true *communion* (intersubjective understanding) between human beings.¹⁰ Valente's point of departure is Celan's notorious difficulty: How could so hermetic a poet conceive poetry as a form of communication?

La materia de la poesía es materia oscura [*sic*]. El hermetismo contemporáneo poco o nada tiene que ver con el hermetismo barroco. Celan con Góngora.

La palabra oscura [*sic*] del poeta contemporáneo no hace concesiones a lo formal; por el contrario, entra más adentro en la espesura, en la propia obscuridad de la experiencia, acaso vivida, pero no conocida.

El poema es para Celan botella echada al mar que, algún día, en algún lugar, va a ser recogida por un tú invocable. Como la mano tendida puede encontrar otra mano y engendrar la salutación.

Negarse a esa palabra oscura es cerrar los oídos—y los ojos—a la voz que canta, a la palabra poética.

Mano, botella sin destino y cargada a la vez de destino como infinitamente multiplicada posibilidad. Hay otra mano que espera en una playa, en el límite móvil de las aguas, cuyo encuentro perfecciona el acto jeroglífico de la escritura. Raíz de la comunicabilidad, pero no comunicación en sí misma, como tan trivialmente se ha querido. (21)

(The material of poetry is "materia oscura." Contemporary hermeticism has little or nothing to do with the Baroque, Celan [has little to do] with Góngora.

The dark word of the contemporary poet makes no concessions to formality; on the contrary, it enters deeper into the thickness, into the darkness proper to experience itself, perhaps lived, but unknown.

The poem is for Celan a bottle thrown into the sea which, some day, somewhere, will be picked up by an invocable you. Just as an extended hand can find another hand and engender salutation.

To deny this word is to close one's ears—and eyes—to the voice that sings, to the poetic word.

A hand, a bottle without destination and at the same time charged with a destination as a possibility infinitely multiplied. There is another hand that waits on a beach, at the mobile limit of the waters, whose act of finding perfects the hieroglyphic act of writing. The root of communicability, but not mere communication, as some have so trivially insisted.)

This text, given here in its entirety, aims to disambiguate *comunicabilidad* from

the more commonplace notion of *comunicación*. Communication was the watchword for postwar poets who adopted Vicente Aleixandre's slogan "poesía es comunicación" (poetry is communication). It was Valente's own generation, in fact, that called this shibboleth into question, vindicating the role of poetic *conocimiento*. Valente's disparaging of mere communication, then, is consistent with a long-standing position that predates his deep engagement with Celan's poetry. Valente contrasts communication to a seemingly synonymous but more abstract concept: "communicability" is a paradoxical concept, in that it entails the negation of "communication" itself, as the latter concept is commonly understood. An admittedly superficial view of some of Celan's (and Valente's) poetry regards it as a solipsistic discourse that looks inward to the poet's own psyche rather than reaching out to its potential readers. Miguel García-Posada, for example, describes Valente's later development in the following terms: "Apareció así un poeta hermético, intransitivo, fragmentario, que alumbraba versos de tan incandescente como misteriosa belleza, abismado en su propio ensimismamiento, que hacía de la palabra poética un absoluto" (7).

Valente's "communicability," however, cannot be understood as a negation of communication or as a turn toward poetic "hermeticism." The shipwreck on a desert island consigns his message to the sea in a hopeful attempt to establish communication with other human beings. The obvious question, then, is why the poet would aspire to so chancy a mode of communication. Stated another way, why must communication—the poet's ultimate aim—be both affirmed and problematized? The image of the message in the bottle (*Flaschenpost*) is taken from Celan's address at Bremen, which Valente also translates in his *Lectura de Paul Celan*:

El poema, en la medida en que es, en efecto, una forma de aparición del lenguaje, y por lo tanto de esencia dialógica, puede ser una botella arrojada al mar, abandonada a la esperanza—tantas veces frágil, por supuesto—de que cualquier día, en alguna parte, pueda ser recogida en una playa, en la playa del corazón tal vez. Los poemas, en ese sentido, están en camino: se dirigen hacia algo. ¿Hacia qué? Hacia algún lugar abierto que invocar, que ocupar, hacia un tú invocable, hacia una realidad que invocar. (18)

(The poem, to the extent that it is, in effect, a form of apparition of language, and thus essentially dialogic, can be a bottle thrown into the sea, abandoned to the hope—so often fragile, of course—that some day, somewhere, it can be picked up on a beach, on the beach of the heart perhaps. Poems, in this sense, are on the road: they address themselves toward something. Toward what? Toward some open place which they can invoke, occupy, toward an invocable you, toward a reality that they can invoke.)

On one level, the metaphor of the message in the bottle, which Celan in turn borrowed from the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (Felstiner 116), reflects the

very real situation in which the poet, or any other writer for that matter, must work. Unlike a face-to-face dialogue, the communication from poet to reader depends on several contingencies. The poet does not know who his or her potential readers are; these readers may come across the poet's book by sheer chance, picking it up in a friend's house or stumbling across it in a second-hand bookstore. Furthermore, even such a chance encounter is not sufficient, since the potential reader may not be prepared to attend to the poet's words.

Why, then, does the poet problematize communication even further by cultivating a deliberately difficult mode of writing? Valente conceives the difficulty of modern poetry as essential rather than accidental, distinguishing Celan from the baroque poet Góngora. Arguing, implicitly, against widespread but superficial understandings of "la poesía de la experiencia," he stresses "la propia obscuridad de la experiencia, acaso vivida, pero no conocida" (the intrinsic obscurity of existence, perhaps lived but not known). If experience itself is inherently mysterious, *unknown even if lived*, there can be no appeal to the unproblematical communication of such an experience. As Valente explained in a much earlier essay, "Conocimiento y comunicación," "Precisamente sobre ese inmenso campo de realidad *experimentada pero no conocida* opera la poesía" (Poetry operates precisely on this immense sphere of reality that is experienced but not known) (*Las palabras de la tribu* 6; emphasis added).

Communication, then, is under threat on several fronts at once: by the tenuous connection between the poet and the reader, by the inherent difficulty of the message, and by the enigmatic nature of experience itself. Yet communication remains the stated goal for both Valente and Celan. The "hermeticism" of their poetry is counterbalanced by its efforts to reach "el tú invocable." The more profound mode of communication it proposes depends, paradoxically, on an initial thwarting of ordinary channels of communication. In yet another text prefatory to his translations of Celan, Valente warns against a certain overconfidence in the subject's apprehension of other subjects:

Dar por cierto el conocimiento del otro es ignorar que este presunto conocimiento es una mera proyección de nuestro yo. Suprimida esa proyección ocultante, el otro sólo puede ser percibido como esencialmente desconocido: la faz misteriosa del otro. Y también, sólo en la medida en que es percibido como un misterio, puede el otro ofrecérsenos como fuente posible del conocer y del amar. Con el yo así percibo como otro y con el que así como otro a mí mismo me percibe puedo construir un mundo, una relación o un espacio de fluido intercambio de la diferencia con la diferencia. El misterio está en la diferencia misma; y, en ella, la raíz del conocimiento y del amor. Pensamiento, éste, que no traiciona su estirpe: la del pensar, la de la radical heterogeneidad del ser. Su naturaleza esencialmente dialógica. (14)

(To take as a truth the knowledge of another is to be unaware that this presumed knowledge is a mere projection of our self. When this concealing projection is

suppressed, the other can only be perceived as essentially unknown: the mysterious face of the other. And also, only to the extent that the other is perceived as a mystery can this other be offered to us as a possible source of knowing and loving. With the self I can thus perceive as other, and with the other who likewise sees me as other, I can construct a world. A relation of a space or of fluid interchange of difference with difference. The mystery lies in difference itself, and in it, the root of knowledge and love. A thought (this last) that does not betray its category: that of thinking, of the radical heterogeneity of being. Its essentially dialogic nature.)

Interestingly enough, it is the presumption that we *already* understand the other that leads to egotistical or solipsistic projections. Valente's line of argument (indebted to Levinas's ethical theory) turns the accusation of solipsism, made so often against certain forms of contemporary poetry, back upon the accuser. True dialogue only becomes possible once true difference, "la radical heterogeneidad del ser," has been fully acknowledged.

An "Antecomienzo," added to the 1995 edition of *Lectura de Paul Celan*, makes it clear that Valente conceives of his own relation to Celan as a "demorado diálogo":

Las presentes versiones son resultado breve—fecundamente frustrado—de un largo periodo de frecuentación de un lenguaje nuevo, de una paralela desfrecuentación de lenguajes gastados o vacíos, de un demorado diálogo, de un movimiento de irremediable aproximación o *philia*.

En la medida en que alguna parte de estos textos corresponde a momentos en que mi propia relación con el existir era una leve línea débil, su estructura es fragmentaria. Son sólo apuntes de una conversación titubeante, apenas ya posible. En ese sentido, me parecen ahora señal o signo de mi no extinción. Salvíficas señales. O milagrosos restos de un naufragio feliz.

Se ha tendido una mano. La tensión de la mano tendida marca una dirección: la realidad. "La poesía no es mimesis, no es simple representación, se convierte en realidad. Realidad poética, texto que ya no sigue a la realidad, sino que se configura y funda como realidad," escribe a propósito de Celan Peter Szondi.

El lenguaje ha descendido a las zonas infernales de la historia y ha vuelto, ha reaparecido para hablar, para ir hacia algún lugar nunca hallado, hacia el otro, hacia ti, hacia un tú invocable. (9)

(The present versions are the brief result—productively frustrated—of a long period of frequenting a new language, along with a corresponding lack of frequenting of worn out and empty languages, [the result] of a prolonged dialogue, of a movement of irremediable approximation or *philia*.

To the extent that a part of these texts corresponds to periods of my life when my own relation to existence was a weak, faint line, their structure is fragmentary. They are but notes to a faltering conversation, now barely possible. In this respect, they seem to me now as a signal or sign of my non-extinction. Salvational signs. Or miraculous remains of a fortunate shipwreck.

A hand has been extended. The tension of the extended hand marks a direction: reality. "Poetry is not mimesis, it is not simple repetition, but is transformed

into reality. Poetic reality, a text that no longer follows reality, but is configured and founded as reality," writes Peter Szondi à propos of Celan.

Language has descended to the infernal zones of history and has returned, has reappeared to speak, to go toward some never encountered place, toward the other, toward you, toward an invocable you.)

This text works through, once again, the key concepts and images of Celan's Bremen address. Once again, the possibility of communication is at once problematized and affirmed: Valente's dialogue with his precursor is fragmentary, interrupted, hesitant, "apenas ya posible," but at the same time profound, inevitable, and redemptive.

Quoting from Szondi, a close friend of Celan as well as an important hermeneutic theorist in his own right, Valente also makes his own Martin Heidegger's ontological conception of poetic language as foundational rather than mimetic of reality. Many of the elements of Celan's poetics that Valente emphasizes have, in fact, a Heideggerian source. While the pairing of Heidegger and Celan, the former Nazi and the Holocaust survivor, may seem counter-intuitive, this kinship is in fact well established in the critical literature. Felstiner recounts Celan's visit to Heidegger in the Black Forest in 1967 (244–47) and points out that "patent Heideggerianisms marked Celan's Bremen address" (149). Celan was reading Heidegger as early as 1953: "He underscored the philosopher's remarks on Hölderlin's elegy 'Bread and Wine,' especially that poem's question, 'what use are poets in a destitute time?' (*wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit*)" (Felstiner 72).

The number of "Heideggerians" (in the broadest sense of the term) who have also been drawn to Celan's poetry is striking: Gadamer, Szondi, Lacoue-Labarthe, Derrida, Steiner, Levinas, and Bruns come to mind.¹¹ Perhaps Valente belongs to this category as well. It should not be surprising that the most influential twentieth-century "continental" philosopher and the most significant poet of postwar Europe, both writing in German, should attract the attention of the same writers and theorists. More to the point, the problem of "communicability," or intersubjective understanding, lies at the heart of contemporary hermeneutics in the Heideggerian tradition. Celan's poetry poses a crucial challenge to this tradition. Hans-Georg Gadamer's approach to some of Celan's late, cryptic poems is instructive. The author of *Truth and Method* proposes a deliberately non-specialized approach to this poetry: "Generally, I think it is a sound principle not to view poetry as an arcane cryptogram for scholars, but rather as a something intended for the members of a shared language community" (192). This position does not entail a total rejection of the specialized scholarly apparatus needed to decipher some of Celan's more difficult work. Gadamer himself makes use of scholarly material to correct and modify his readings in subsequent revisions of his essay on Celan. It would be more accurate to affirm that Celan's work constitutes a limit case for Gadamerian hermeneutics, given

Celan's extremely problematic relation to the "shared language community" of German speakers. Even with a poet as difficult as Celan, Gadamer insists on the value of slow, attentive, but dictionary-free reading: "I had no lexicon at hand. I lay in a sand-pit in the Dutch dunes and mulled the verses over, 'listening earnestly in the wind,' until I thought I understood them" (149–50).

This method of reading Celan, while philologically "naïve," exemplifies the optimism characteristic of Gadamer's hermeneutics. For Gadamer, understanding and interpretation are linguistic acts; a corollary is that linguistic messages are ultimately comprehensible. A slow and attentive reader, then, will succeed in understanding even the most difficult poetic text. The title of Gadamer's essay on Celan, "Who Am I and Who Are You?," refers to a Celan poem also translated by Valente:

IN DEN FLÜSSEN nördlich der Zukunft
werf ich das Netz aus, das du
zögernd beschwerst
mit von Steinem geschriebenen
Schatten.

EN LOS RÍOS, al norte del futuro,
tiendo la red que tú
titubeante cargas
de escritura de piedras,
sombras. (58–59)

(In rivers, to the north of the future,
I extend the net which you
stammering load
with writing of stones,
shadows.)¹²

The question raised in this poem is, as Gadamer suggests, the relation between the *I* and the *you* (Gadamer 83–86). In Gadamer's nuanced reading of this poem, the *I* of the poem is the poet in his search for words. If the *I* is a poet, however, the *you* could also be the reader, whose enigmatic response to the poet's hopeful gesture is to load this net with shadowy words, weighted down like stones. Alternatively, the *I* could be a reader casting a net into the water in the hope of retrieving a *Flaschenpost* from the enigmatic poet: the interpreter of Celan's poetry is placed in the position of casting a net into the water and being rewarded with cryptic "stone-written shadows." In any case, the dialogue between the first and second persons of the verb is both prolonged and *titubeante*, as Valente characterizes his own dialogue with Celan.

In a poem from his 1997 collection *Nadie*, Valente takes up once again some key images from his *Lectura de Paul Celan*:

A Coral

AL NORTE
 de la línea de sombras
 donde todo hace agua,
 rompientes
 en que el mar océano
 se engendra o se deshace,
 y el naufragio inminente todavía
 no se ha consumado, ciegamente
 te amo. ("SOS," *Nadie* 17)

(To the north
 of a line of shadows
 where everything becomes water,
 breakers
 in which the ocean sea
 is engendered or comes apart,
 and the imminent shipwreck has not yet
 been consummated, blindly
 I love you.)

The first two lines evoke "En los ríos al norte del futuro," with its stone-written shadows, while the parenthetical title "SOS" and the reference to an imminent shipwreck define the poem's communicative situation as a cry for help, perhaps a message in a bottle. The poem is addressed to a "tú invocable," a female addressee whose name, "Coral" (Valente's wife), is suggestive of fertile under-water riches.

The hermeneutic model of communication that emerges from this reading of *Lectura de Celan* is already implicit in Valente's poetry in the 1960s. The degree to which the poems of the 1950s lend themselves to "reader-response" criticism is one indication of this (Debicki, "José Ángel Valente: Reading and Re-reading," *Poetry of Discovery* 102–22).¹³ Valente's essay "La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir" is a classic statement of the relation between text and reader. Still, quite a few of his poems from the 1950s and 1960s put forward "utilitarian" views of poetic language, leading many critics to insist on the distinction between the later, "mystical" Valente and the historicist Valente of the earlier period (García-Posada). The hermeneutic model, already present in his poetry, comes into view rather gradually, becoming fully explicit only in later books such as *Mandorla* and *El fulgor*.

Valente's early calls for poetic usefulness echo the Sartrean concept of *engagement*, which was enormously influential in Spain in the 1950s. Sartre, however, had posited a notorious division between poetry and prose, transitive and intransitive writing: "Poets are men who refuse to *utilize* language" (Sartre 29; original emphasis).¹⁴ This definition reflects Sartre's acquaintance

with the modern French tradition that includes Mallarmé as well as the Surrealists. A young Spanish poet of Valente's generation, then, inherited a potentially disabling opposition between political commitment and poetry itself. Instead of accepting the terms of this dichotomy, however, Valente, from a fairly early date, attempted to formulate a pragmatic justification for poetic autonomy. In the 1971 essay "La hermenéutica y la cortedad del decir," he associates Hölderlin's question "wozu Dichter?" with Mallarmé's struggle with language (*Las palabras de la tribu* 61). The title of the collection where this essay can be read puts an unusual spin on a line from Mallarmé's homage to Poe: "donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu." Valente associates poetic purity with its apparent opposite, usefulness, since he believes that the purification of language is something useful in and of itself.

The "later Valente," however, moves from Sartrean *engagement* toward a Heideggerian distrust of instrumental language. The conviction that poetic language is foundational rather than mimetic, which Valente shares with Heidegger, can lead to a sort of mystification of poetic language, so that the poet (or the philosopher) remains disengaged from the Hölderlinian "dürftiger Zeit," from historical reality in any literal sense. Heidegger remains vulnerable to the charge of mystification on (at least) two levels. The fact that he placed his own philosophy at the service of Hitler's Third Reich, as Rector of Freiburg, is horrific in itself. A second problem is that Heidegger's characteristic mode of argumentation does not lend itself to paraphrase, except on its own terms. The result can be the problematic notion of philosophy (or poetry) as a truer, "ontological" language—superior to other forms of discourse, but in an ultimately mystified and inexplicable way.

Valente, however, derives his Heideggerian poetics from Celan, and perhaps other post-Heideggerians such as Blanchot, Levinas, and Zambrano, rather than directly from Heidegger.¹⁵ He is thus able to preserve the link between poetic autonomy and ethical commitment, effectively making his own Celan's solution to the apparent dichotomy between pragmatic and ontological conceptions of poetic language. Since Celan's poetry bears witness to the Holocaust, but in a poetic language that refuses any reduction to facile communication, he becomes a natural model for a poet, like Valente, who has been struggling for decades to reconcile historicity with poetic autonomy. In one of his longer, more discursive poems, Valente echoes Celan's answer to Adorno's well-known statement that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric:

Y cómo, preguntaron, cómo
 escribir después de Auschwitz.
 Y después de Auschwitz,
 y después de Hiroshima, cómo no escribir.

¿No habría que escribir precisamente
 después de Auschwitz o después
 de Hiroshima, si ya fuésemos, dioses
 de un tiempo roto, en el después
 para que al fin se torne
 en nunca y nadie pueda
 hacer morir aun más los muertos? (*Al dios del lugar* 97)

(And how, they asked, how
 to write after Auschwitz?)

And after Auschwitz, after Hiroshima
 how can we not write.

Wouldn't it be necessary to write precisely
 after Auschwitz or after
 Hiroshima, if we already existed, gods
 of a broken time, in the aftermath
 so that finally it might become
 never and nobody could
 make the dead die even more?)

In a briefer poem from the same collection, Valente glosses Celan's phrase "Singbarer Rest" ("singable remnant") (Celan 100–01), the first line of a poem from *Atemwende* (Breathturn):

Singbarer Rest
 Paul Celan

QUEDAR
 en lo que queda
 después del fuego,
 residuo, sola
 raíz de lo cantable. ("Fénix," *Al dios del lugar* 25)

(To remain
 in what remains
 after the fire,
 residue, only
 root of the singable. ["Phoenix"])

The residue that remains in the wake of the destructive event becomes, paradoxically or not, the only true source for poetry: "sola/ raíz de lo cantable." As in the myth of the Phoenix, negation leads to affirmation (López Castro 124–25). It is precisely after the disaster that poetic language, in all of its hermetic complexity, becomes most necessary.

To read Valente alongside of Celan is, in some sense, to bring to light the former's own characteristic concerns, which are revealed in even more explicit form in his intertextual dialogue with the German-language poet. The proper context for accounting for Valente's interest in hermeneutics, poetic autonomy,

and historical engagement is the wider European tradition with which he has consciously affiliated himself: Heidegger, Sartre, Blanchot, and Celan provide more clues to his work than, say, Blas de Otero, José Hierro, or Gloria Fuertes. While Valente clearly deserves to be read in this "European" context, he also tends to resist overt stylistic echoes of other poets, making the question of influence difficult to determine.

What of Valente's actual versions of Celan? He translates fewer than twenty poems, including only five from Celan's late period. The fact that he does not translate more of Celan is consistent with his approach to other authors in his personal pantheon: when synthesizing the work of other poets, he is usually concerned with a few essential concepts that confirm his own obsessions. In this respect, the theoretical apparatus in *Lectura de Paul Celan*, the translation of the Bremen address and Valente's commentaries on Celan, are as significant as the translations themselves. Valente is often attracted to writers, like Celan or Lezama Lima, who push language to the limits of comprehensibility. Yet he himself favors a more contained, austere style, writing extremely short poems in a restricted and almost transparent lexicon. In comparison to Celan, with his complex *logopeia*, his trademark knots of compound words and his violent distortions of the German language, Valente is an almost transparent writer. His writing is difficult for some readers, it is true, but this difficulty tends to be more conceptual than linguistic. In this Valente follows modern French poets like René Char and Yves Bonnefoy, who favor flatter, less complex linguistic surfaces, much more than he resembles Celan.

When translating Celan, Valente tends to be fairly *literal*, closely following word order and line-breaks as well as semantic sense. His translation of "Erblinde schon heut" exemplifies his method:

Erblinde schon heut:
 auch sie Ewigkeit steht voller Augen—
 darin
 ertrinkt, was den Bildern hinweghahf
 über den Weg, den sie kamen,
 darin
 erlischt, was aus dich aus der Sprache
 fortnahm mit einer Geste,
 die du geschehn liesst wie
 den Tanz und Seide und Nichts.

Ciégate para siempre:
 también la eternidad está llena de ojos—
 allí
 se ahoga lo que hizo caminar a las imágenes
 al término en que han aparecido,
 allí

se extingue lo que el lenguaje
también te ha retirado con un gesto,
lo que dejabas iniciarse como
la danza de dos palabras sólo hechas
de otoño y seda y nada. (*Cuaderno de versiones* 281)

(Blind yourself for all time:
eternity too is full of eyes—
there
is drowned what made the images walk
to the limit where they have appeared,
there
is extinguished what language
has also taken away from you with a gesture,
what you allowed to begin like
the dance of two words made only
of autumn and silk and nothing.)

The word *allí* echoes the sound of the German *darin*. (Pierre Joris achieves a similar effect with the English word *wherein*; my own translation, more modestly, aims to give the literal sense of Valente's translation, rather than to reproduce the effect of Celan's poem.) Given Valente's commitment to literality, however, the translation *Weg* as *término* is surprising. *Weg* [way] is, of course, a quintessentially Heideggerian word. The word *término*, on the other hand, is evocative of Valente's predilection for limits, boundaries, and thresholds. This subtle shift shows that Valente is making the text his own, even when he appears to be following Celan quite closely.

Since Valente drew on multiple, overlapping sources to develop his mature poetics, it becomes extremely difficult to gauge the exact degree to which his poetry is indebted to Celan, except when he cites Celan directly. Even a poem like "Mandorla," which takes its title from Celan, is—to my mind—more evocative of María Zambrano than of Celan himself. Like many of Valente's other poems from this period, it contains contrasting images of darkness and light and "concave" interior spaces identified with the female body:

Estás oscura en tu concavidad
y en tu secreta sombra contenida
inscrita en ti.

Acaricié tu sangre.

Me entraste al fondo de tu noche ebrio
de claridad. ("Mandorla," *Material memoria* 81)

(You are dark in your concavity
and in your secret shadow contained
inscribed in you.)

I caressed your blood.

You entered into the bottom of your night drunk
with clarity.)

This is not to say that Valente's poetry would have been the same without Celan: clearly Celan meant a great deal to the Spanish poet, and constituted a central point of reference during the crucial years in which he was formulating his mature poetics. Valente's pared-down, essential language resembles that of Celan on the less frequent occasions when the latter avoids the extreme density for which he is best known. The translation of "Erblinde..." analyzed above, for example, could almost pass as an original poem by Valente. The translation presents no lexical problem, no obstacle to the reader at the level of vocabulary, although the conceptual difficulty remains high.

The significance of Valente's translation of Celan is best understood in the total context of the Spanish poet's Heideggerian roots: a critic looking only at the translations themselves, comparing Valente's Spanish with Celan's German, would come up with a useful but much more limited analysis. Translation, then, is best understood as a process of cultural transmission, in which the linguistic process of recasting a message in another language is only a part. Valente's main purpose in translating Celan is to affiliate himself with a European modernist tradition, or, more precisely, to situate himself within the Spanish literary tradition as the most exemplary representative of modernist poetics. Valente enjoyed a unique and privileged role in the Spanish literary politics of the last two decades of the twentieth century. Celan served Valente well, since the latter was able to identify himself with one of the most prestigious poets of postwar Europe while also using Celan's theory of communicability to denounce the "realist" poetics of his own time. In this respect, *Lectura de Paul Celan: fragmentos* is a key work for understanding Valente's place in recent Spanish poetry as well as his deep engagement with the Heideggerian tradition.

Notes

- 1 I hesitate to associate this movement with any concept of "postmodernism," since it unproblematically evokes the authority of "Great Moderns" like Mallarmé, Rilke, and Juan Ramón Jiménez.
- 2 Some readers might find Valente's particular version of literary modernity to be too "generic," too self-contained and homogeneous. While there is much to admire in Valente's later work, his influence has not been entirely benign, since his alternative to the facile revival of the "poetry of experience" is a narrowly conceived poetic essentialism in which poetry all too easily claims for itself the status of an arcane knowledge meant only for an elite interested in recapturing the spiritual horizon lost with the secularization of modern societies.
- 3 Goytisolo has acknowledged Valente's help in the researching of *Las virtudes del pájaro solitario*, a novel inspired by San Juan de la Cruz, one of Valente's key influences.

- 4 There are other writers, like Octavio Paz, whose positions closely parallel Valente's, but who do not explicitly form part of the Spanish poet's pantheon. Despite Paz's defense of High Modernism and his shared interest in Asian mysticism, Valente maintained a distance from him, especially in later years when personal relations between the two writers became strained. I am indebted to Claudio Rodríguez Fer for providing background information on Valente's problematic relation to Paz, and to José María Rodríguez García for suggesting the comparison between Valente and Paz. Rodríguez García also offered many helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this article.
- 5 See also "The 'Sacred' Speech of Hölderlin" (*The Work of Fire* 111–31). According to Claudio Rodríguez Fer, Valente was an assiduous reader both of Heidegger and of the secondary literature on the German philosopher (personal correspondence). Van Kelly, my colleague at the University of Kansas and a specialist in René Char, helped me to sort out the connections among Char, Heidegger, and Blanchot.
- 6 Valente's translations have never attracted the attention of his exegetes. One factor contributing to this neglect is the inaccessibility of many of these texts. The two editions of his *Lectura de Paul Celan* are both difficult to find. All citations, unless otherwise noted, are from the 1995 volume: I wanted to preserve the sense that this work is a coherent *book*. Rodríguez Fer's meticulous edition of *Cuaderno de versiones* contains all of Valente's translations including *Lectura de Paul Celan* (although the work loses its title in this edition). I should mention, for the benefit of readers not familiar with modern Spanish poetry, that the Galician poet and Valente-scholar Claudio Rodríguez Fer is *not* the late Spanish poet Claudio Rodríguez, to whom I also allude in this chapter.
- 7 Benjamin argues that "*Les fleurs du mal* was the last lyric work that had a European repercussion; no later work penetrated beyond a more or less limited linguistic area" (192). Updating this affirmation, a similar case could be made for Celan, although the scope of his influence is obviously not confined to the European continent.
- 8 According to Claudio Rodríguez Fer, a letter written by Valente in 1974 reveals that he had already translated a few Celan poems by this date, although Celan's name doesn't begin to appear in published work until 1978 (personal correspondence).
- 9 I analyze this poem along somewhat similar lines in my chapter on Valente in *The Poetics of Self-Consciousness*, although I neglect to bring Heidegger into the picture.
- 10 The concept of *community* has been at the center of a theoretical discussion involving Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Maurice Blanchot, among others. Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* consists of a reading of Bataille's thought in light of Blanchot's concept of *désœuvrement*. (Blanchot's *La communauté inavouable* is also relevant to this discussion.) What all three authors have in common is their questioning of teleological models of community (from communism and fascism to nationalism and liberal democracy) in which the feelings of belonging to a communal whole and communing with others are essentialized as historical destinies, thus precluding the possibility of a more fluid negotiation of identities, and even the ethical renunciation of identity.
- 11 Bruns's *Maurice Blanchot* contains a revealing comparison between Celan and Blanchot, another theorist deeply influenced by Heidegger (81–101, 145–72). See also Lacoue-Labarthe's Heideggerian reading of Celan in *La poésie comme expérience*.
- 12 Valente's translation is fairly literal. He has, however, chosen to place "sombras" in apposition to "escritura de piedras," rather than attempting to reproduce the characteristically German syntax of "mit von Steinem geschriebenen / Schatten," "with stone-written shadows." Joris translates "with shadows stones / wrote" (Celan, *Breathturn* 61). My own translation here is of Valente's translation, not of Celan's original poem.
- 13 To associate Valente with continental hermeneutics, as I have attempted to do here, confirms and extends Debicki's approach. My approach also underscores the importance of Hart's emphasis on *dialogue* in her articles on *El fulgor* and *Al Dios del lugar*.

- 14 In *Writing Degree Zero* Barthes questions Sartre's *engagement* while retaining the Sartrean view of modern poetry as an intransitive language that cannot be reconciled with ethical or historical *écriture*. The question of Heidegger's influence on Sartre is a relevant one. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to explore it here.
- 15 Valente was strongly drawn to the Jewish tradition represented by figures like Buber, Levinas, Celan, and Jabès. Levinas, himself heavily influenced by Heidegger, raises the question of whether Celan's idea of the other draws him closer to Martin Buber than to Heidegger: "The poem 'becomes dialogue, is often an impassioned dialogue, ... meetings, paths of a voice toward a vigilant Thou'—Buber's categories! Would they, then, be preferred to so much brilliant exegesis majestically descending from the *Schwarzwald* upon Hölderlin, Trakl, and Rilke, portraying poetry as opening the world, the place between earth and sky?" (42).

CHAPTER SIX

Antonio Gamoneda's *Libro de los venenos*: The Limits of Genre

Poetry is not so much a genre of “literature” as it is a mode of signification. Such, at least, is the view of many contemporary poets in Spain. This proposition can be justified on historical grounds, since poetry predates the modern concept of “literature” by thousands of years. It is also clear that poetry cannot be confined to a single *genre*: although the word is often used as short-hand for *lyric* poetry, contemporary poets also work in longer, more ambitious forms of more nebulous generic identity. The opposition between *poetry* and *literature* can also lead to a more constrained view of poetry, conceived of as a purer art form devoid of merely literary excrescences. At times, in fact, the more expansive definition is combined in an odd way with this purist view. If poetry is no longer contained within the genre of the (lyric) poem, then it can be found anywhere, even in ostensibly non-poetic (non-literary) texts. Yet, by the same token, this sort of poetry might be the missing element in many run-of-the-mill novels and plays, *literary* but essentially non-poetic texts.

Antonio Gamoneda is one of the names most likely to be cited by contemporary Spanish poets holding the views outlined above.¹ His 1995 *Libro de los venenos: corrupción y fábula del Libro Sexto de Pedacio Dioscórides y Andrés de Laguna, acerca de los venenos mortíferos y de las fieras que arrojan de sí ponzoña* (Book of Poisons: corruption and fable of the sixth book of Pedacio Dioscorides and Andrés de Laguna, concerning fatal poisons and beasts that throw forth venom from themselves) is one of the most striking books of poetry to be published in the 1990s, especially since it does not answer to the usual description of a collection of short poems, or even a “long poem.” While bearing Gamoneda’s name on the title page, the book is actually an edition of, and commentary on, the concluding section of Andrés de Laguna’s sixteenth-century translation of a botanical/pharmacological text by Dioscorides, a Greek physician who served with the Roman army in the first century A.D., during the reign of the emperor Nero.

What justification is there, then, for calling this book a “poetic” text? That is the critical problem I hope to address in this chapter. As a first step, we can rule

out fairly quickly the supposition that this is a critical edition of Laguna's text, since Gamoneda fails to deliver the necessary scholarly apparatus. No critical edition hoping to gain the reader's trust would advertise itself on the title page as a "corrupción y fábula." Gamoneda does offer some philological and scientific commentary of scholarly interest, but his main goal is to offer his own idiosyncratic reading of the text, which he presents to us as a "found poem" of extraordinary linguistic complexity and emotional resonance.

The brief preface to *Libro de los venenos* bears close examination, since it is here that the author gives a series of clues for the reading of his text, paying special attention to the question of genre: "El lector de este *Libro de los venenos* tendrá que decidir por sí mismo la especie de la obra que tiene en sus manos" (The reader of this *Book of Poisons* will have to decide for himself what kind of book he holds in his hands) (11). Gamoneda offers three possibilities, beginning with the most straightforward: "Puede resolver que consiste en un tratado científico enraizado en la antigüedad, acrecentado en tiempos renacentistas y nuevamente desarrollado en nuestros días con noticias relativas a virtudes, saludables o mortales, generadas por seres y materias de los tres reinos; probablemente no se habrá equivocado" (He might decide that it consists of a scientific treatise with its origins in antiquity, supplemented in the Renaissance era and newly developed in our day with news relative to properties, healthful or lethal, generated by creatures and material of the three realms; probably he won't have made an error) (11). The second two readings are explicitly *novelistic*, and not wholly separable from each other:

Puede, de otra manera, sentir el cuerpo de un texto narrativo, más alguna divagación medianamente lírica, sobre los efectos de un repertorio de venenos, o lo que es igual, la pasión química, la compostura y los movimientos del ánimo de los envenenados, entendiendo que las ocurrencias tienen que ver con la crueldad de Mitridates Eupátor, rey del Ponto (132 a 63 a. de J.C.) y con la diligencia, fría hasta en el amor, de Kratevas, médico y botánico en la servidumbre científica de Mitridates, personajes ambos de probada, aunque nebulosa, existencia histórica. Entendido de esta manera el discurso, también puede leerse, sin grandes posibilidades de error y a causa de su inclinación narrativa, como una disforme novela cuyos protagonistas (además de los sanadores y los enfermos, de los envenenadores y los envenenados) serían las plantas mortales y las salutíferas, las bestias de la ponzoña, los miembros, los órganos, los humores, las substancias... (11–12)

(On the other hand, the reader might sense the body of a narrative text, in addition to some moderately lyrical divagations, about the effects of a repertory of poisons, or, what amounts to the same thing, the chemical passion, the composure and the movement of the soul of those who have been poisoned, understanding that the events pertain to the cruelty of the emperor Mithridates Eupator, the king of Ponto (132–63 B.C.) and with the diligence, cold even in love, of Kratevas, a doctor and botanist in scientific service to Mithridates, both characters of proven,

although nebulous, historical existence. If the discourse is understood in this way, it can also be read, without great possibility of error, and owing to its narrative inclination, as a shapeless novel whose protagonists (alongside the curers and patients, the poisoners and the poisoned) are deadly and salutary plants, poisonous beasts, members, organs, humors, substances...)

While the preface appears to invite the reader to choose from among these two or three options (with little risk of error in any case), they are not really alternatives to one other, since all of them will come into play in any attentive reading of the text. Gamoneda refuses to decide the question, in any case: "... convencido de que los llamados géneros no son otra cosa que poesía diversamente preparada, me retiro del problema" (... convinced that the so-called genres are nothing but poetry prepared in different ways, I withdraw from the problem) (12). His own outline of the three possibilities, furthermore, remains incomplete, since the text may in fact be open to *multiple* readings. I propose to interpret this work as, among other things, an exercise in Borgesian pseudo-erudition and as an introduction to Antonio Gamoneda's imagination, dominated by pain, death, and the relation of human life (and language itself) to the physical world.

The text of *El libro de los venenos* is divided among three typographically distinct voices. According to an editor's note, "Pedacio Dioscórides" speaks in roman type, "Andrés de Laguna" in italics, and "Antonio Gamoneda" in a smaller font of roman type (17). Dioscorides' six-part treatise on *materia medica* was the most widely circulated work in this field from antiquity through the Renaissance, translated into Arabic, Latin, and other languages numerous times over the centuries. *El libro de los venenos* reproduces only the sixth and final section of this treatise, which is probably not the work of Dioscorides at all: modern scholars believe this section of the text to be apocryphal.² The voice of the Greek physician—or whoever wrote this section of the book—is concise, to-the-point, and practical. He tends to offer a brief account of the symptoms caused by a certain substance, followed by a list of recommended antidotes:

A los que han tragado el *dorcynio*, llamado de algunos *solatro furioso*, se les representa un sabor de leche en el gusto, se les hincha de humedad la lengua y les sale a borbollones mucha sangre del pecho. También suelen purgar por abajo negras reliquias.

Antes que se muestren estos accidentes, serán remedio común el vómito y los clisteres, pero los socorremos en particular con aguamiel o leche de borrica. Son también saludables el vino pasado con anís, las pechugas de gallina, las langostas marinas y los camarones. (64)

(Those who have swallowed *dorcynio*, called by some *solatro furioso* [belladonna], imagine that they have the taste of milk in their mouth, their tongue swells up from humidity and a lot of blood gushes from their chest. They also tend to purge black relics from below.

Before these symptoms appear, vomiting and enemas will be the remedy, but we will treat them in particular with *aguamiel* or donkey milk. Wine treated with anise, chicken breasts, sea-snails and shrimp are also beneficial.)³

The "poetic" value of Dioscorides' text is inherent in the range of his scientific terminology, which includes commonplace plants and animals along with unidentifiable substances and mythological beasts like unicorns, hydras, and basilisks. At the same time, his general approach is empirical, rather than religious or supernatural. In their attempts to explain the treatise, both Laguna and Gamoneda draw on a rich repertory of science, legend, and lore, enlarging the scope of the original work.

Only a relatively small portion of Gamoneda's text is devoted to the original words of "Dioscórides." Laguna's commentaries, as edited and modernized by Gamoneda, are more verbose than Dioscorides' apocryphal sixth book. Andrés de Laguna was born to a *converso* family in Segovia in 1499, traveled throughout Europe, and became a noted Renaissance humanist and physician to Emperor Charles V and Pope Julian III. He died in 1559. It would be fair to say that both Dioscorides and Laguna were major scientific figures of their respective periods, although Dioscorides, who dominated his field for nearly 1,500 years after his death, is the more significant figure. Laguna's translation and annotation of Dioscorides's *Materia medica*, however, saw more than twenty European editions in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.⁴

Laguna frames his commentary in an ethical discourse foreign to the more pragmatic Dioscorides. Where Dioscorides is concerned with avoiding poisoning by taking certain precautions (making sure a spider or serpent has not fallen into one's food or drink! [22]), Laguna reflects on how a prince might make himself beloved by his subjects, or how parents might make themselves less likely to be a victims of poisoning by their avaricious children: "*Y por cuanto la sucesión suele ser causa de parricidios abominables, no deben esperar los padres al último día para dar su hacienda a los hijos, sino ponerlos en posesión de ella al estar en virtud y en edad cumplidas*" (And since succession tends to be the cause of abominable parricides, parents should not wait until the last minute to give their estate to their children, but rather put them in possession of it when they are worthy of it and of the proper age) (41; italics in original). Laguna tends to express himself in explicitly humanistic terms; thus, a commentary on rabid dogs requires a page-long preamble on the *topos* of the dog as man's best friend. In contrast to the terse, empirical Dioscorides, Laguna is more digressive, mixing scientific observations with anecdotal details and attempts at moral edification.

Gamoneda stands in roughly the same relation to Laguna as Laguna does to Dioscorides. He is editor, compiler, and commentator, presenting Laguna's text to the twentieth-century reader, just as Laguna did for Dioscorides in the sixteenth century. One might expect a twentieth-century writer to adopt a

condescending or at least ironic view of the “picturesque” scientific viewpoint of both Laguna and Dioscorides.⁵ Yet such moments are rare in the text: Gamoneda seldom permits himself to feel superior to the earlier writers, commenting only on Laguna’s rather overwrought description of the effects of menstrual blood: “Triunfe Laguna con sus fantasías y farmacias, que son, en forma y número, como si los bebedores de menstruio fuesen más que los de vino manchego” (Let Laguna triumph with his fantasies and pharmacies, which are in such form and number that one would think that the drinkers of menstrual blood were more common than those of *manchego* wine) (109). While fifteen centuries separate Laguna from Dioscorides, they share a common vocabulary and perspective. (Needless to say, we are reading Dioscorides in sixteenth-century Castilian, modernized by Gamoneda at the end of the twentieth century, rather than in the original Greek.) Science does not seem to have progressed very much in a millennium and a half, when we find the Renaissance doctor discussing methods of testing unicorn horn to see if it is genuine in the following terms: “*También se puede hacer, de la limadura del unicornio, un círculo sobre la mesa, y poner en medio de él una víbora o una araña muy enconada, las cuales estarán sin moverse y como pasmada en el centro, sin allegarse a la superficie, si el unicornio es exquisito*” (One can also make a circle of the unicorn shavings on a table, and put a viper or a very vicious spider in its center; these will remain motionless and stunned in the center, without touching the surface, if the unicorn is exquisite) (46; italics in original). Gamoneda, writing four centuries after Laguna, adopts a language similar to both writers, supplementing their texts with other ancient sources (Pliny, Galen) rather than adopting the point of view of a late twentieth-century historian of science. He feels no need to point out, for example, that unicorns are mythical beasts, preferring to summarize what Pliny the Elder had to say about them. The obvious difference between Gamoneda and the two older scientists is that Gamoneda writes not as a scientist but as a poet, and thus has no need to corroborate the empirical validity of either writer (although he feels free to jump in with contradictory or supplementary evidence derived from other *ancient* sources).

Despite his lack of academic credentials, Gamoneda would seem to be an accomplished amateur botanist and folklorist. The work he invested in researching *Libro de los venenos* must have been substantial, although, as we shall see below, his “scholarship” includes fictional ruses. Much of his commentary is explanatory, as he attempts to make sense of a rich and sometimes obscure scientific terminology:

El meconio es zumo sacado por artificio de adormideras y de él trataré en otro lugar. Albayalde se llama a la substancia blanquísima que resulta del plomo sometido al vinagre. El yeso se saca de una piedra escamosa y blanca que, después de quemada, se muele y cierne; aplicada con clara de huevo, restaña la sangre

hemorrágica. La rana rubeta es la especie perniciosa que se cría entre zarzas; la liebre de mar, pescado sin espina cuya hembra, vista de una mujer preñada, la hace malparir. (26)

(*Meconio* is a juice artificially extracted from poppies and I will discuss it elsewhere. *Albayalde* is the very white substance that results from lead treated with vinegar. Plaster is extracted from a scaly, white stone which after being burnt is ground and spun; applied with egg-white, it stems the flow of hemorrhagic blood. The *rana rubeta* is the pernicious species [of frog] that is raised amid brambles; the sea-hare, a fish without a spine the female of which, when seen by a pregnant woman, will cause her to miscarry.)

In his attempt to define the words used in Dioscorides (and Laguna), Gamonedá sometimes creates an even denser linguistic forest. While his explanations are helpful in the case of the more obscure references, the proliferation of terms produces a baroque exuberance. For the reader without extensive knowledge of venomous plants and animals, the text often strains the limits of comprehensibility, using many terms encountered only in specialized dictionaries.⁶ On the other hand, Gamonedá also feels the need to define more commonplace substances, like "yeso" (plaster) in the passage quoted above. The cumulative result is a profusion of references, ranging from the quotidian to the arcane and the mythological.

While Gamonedá admits to having modernized Laguna's language, reducing its unfamiliarity and archaic qualities, his own language seems archaic in some respects.⁷ His refusal to allow modern scientific discourse into his commentary contributes to this effect. He will quote from ancient authorities, or, less frequently, from contemporaries of Laguna, but not from other twentieth-century authors. One assumes, when he says that the sight of the female "sea-hare" will cause miscarriages, that he is providing us with a tidbit of folklore or ancient medicine, not offering his own scientific judgment. Indeed, he makes a disclaimer that no one should use this book as a manual for treating actual cases of poisoning: "Soy responsable de las falsedades y desviaciones que a este respecto aquí acontezcan y hago aviso de que nadie debe fiar su muerte ni su vida de poderes atribuidos por mí a la naturaleza o la ciencia" (I am responsible for the falsities and deviations in this respect and I warn that no one should entrust their death nor their life to the properties I attribute to nature or to science) (22). This warning seems otiose, given the great emphasis placed on the fictive nature of the scientific knowledge contained in this book. It is precisely when science ceases to make truth claims, in fact, that it can acquire aesthetic value.

Gamonedá does not attempt to bring the text up to date (from the scientific perspective at least). In fact, he takes a step in the opposite direction, taking us back to the age of the legendary king Mithridates Eupator, of the kingdom of Pontus (Asia Minor) during the first century B.C. Kratavas, a botanist or "root

digger” in the service of Mithridates, becomes a fourth narrative voice in *Libro de los venenos*, as Gamoneda quotes extensively from this ancient author. Kratevas’s voice, in fact, threatens to take over the entire *Libro de los venenos*, since it is the most compelling from the point of view of narrative and character development. (This is not to say, of course, that the more purely scientific sections of the work are devoid of literary interest.) Kratevas, in the service of the cruel Mithridates, tests the efficacy of various poisons and remedies on human subjects (and occasionally on himself), recording the results of his experiments in chilling detail. A note of sexual morbidity or sadism is often apparent. At one point Kratevas describes the progressive effects of mercury poisoning on a beautiful slave girl whom Mithridates has instructed him to kill:

“Cada día la encontraba vestida en su túnica y con el cabello recogido. Yo le ponía el vaso en las manos y ella me miraba por encima de él mientras bebía. En la séptima vez, apareció oscuridad en sus labios y eso aumentaba su belleza. En siete días más, los huesos de su rostro se dejaban ver como frutas de sombra en la transparencia de su piel, y la visión morbífica era también belleza creciente en torno a los ojos, semejantes a los de una dulcísima bestia lastimada.” (119)

(“Every day I found her dressed in her tunic and with her hair gathered up. I put the glass in her hands and she gazed at me over it as she drank. The seventh time, darkness appeared in her lips and this augmented her beauty. Seven days later, the bones of her face became visible like fruits of shadow in the transparency of her skin, and the morbid vision was also a growing beauty around her eyes, similar to those of a most beautiful wounded beast.”)

Interestingly, the narrative voice of “Gamoneda” does not editorialize or condemn Kratevas’s sadism, preferring to quote the physician/poisoner’s words without commentary.

Where exactly, though, is the source for the stories that Gamoneda attributes to “Kratevas”? Toward the beginning of *Libro de los venenos*, Gamoneda offers the following information about the narrative voice that will dominate such a substantial portion of the work:

Kratevas fue, quizá, el padre verdadero del antídoto metridato y, con seguridad, el creador de la inmunidad de Mitrídates. Esta seguridad se funda en el literal del códice existente en la Biblioteca Secreta del Vaticano, que relata las experiencias con venenos realizados por Kratevas siguiendo las más de las veces órdenes de Mitrídates. Este códice, con el *Léxico Botánico* que se guarda en la Biblioteca de París, y con el *Tratado de los simples*, que se custodia en la biblioteca de Viena, podría ser toda la obra que dejó Kratevas. Estas escrituras debieron de pasar a manos de Pompeyo (con las memorias del propio Mitrídates, que hemos de dar por perdidas) cuando, vencido el Eupátor y voluntariamente yugulado por la obediencia de un servidor gálata, ya que, dicho está, Mitrídates se había privado a sí mismo de alcanzar la muerte mediante veneno, Kratevas pasó al servicio del

romano. Del texto que se guarda en la fundación de Nicolás V, yo, dividido en mi amor por la fábula y la ciencia, tomo aquellas historias que iluminan el arte de procurar y recibir la muerte, y con ellas soy parte en el Libro Sexto de Dioscórides y Laguna. (44–45)

(Kratevas was, perhaps, the true originator of Mithridates' antidote and, surely, the creator of Mithridates' immunity. This certainty is established literally in the codex existing in the Vatican's Secret Library, which relates the experiments with poisons carried out by Kratevas, usually following the orders of Mithridates. This codex, along with the *Botanical Lexicon* housed in the Library of Paris, and with the *Treatise on Simples* guarded in the library of Vienna, might be the complete works that Kratevas left to us. These writings must have passed to the hands of Pompey (along with Mithridates' memoirs, which we must assume are lost) when Eupator was vanquished and willingly had his throat cut by a Galatian slave, since, as has been said, Mithridates had deprived himself of achieving death by poisoning, and Kratevas passed to the service of the Roman. Of the text kept in the foundation of Nicholas V, I, divided between my love for fable and for science, take those stories that illuminate the art of procuring and receiving death, and with these stories I take part in the Sixth Book of Dioscorides and Laguna.)

The unsuspecting reader might assume that Kratevas's works are available in other modern editions or translations. Such a strikingly vivid and cruel writer, a first-century B.C. precursor to the Marquis de Sade, would surely have attracted the attention of modern translators and readers. Yet a search of the catalogues of the Library of Congress, the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, and the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris will uncover no books or manuscripts attributed to "Kratevas." A search on the internet will take the reader back to Antonio Gamoneda's *Libro de los venenos* (and to a recent novel by Argentine writer Cristina Bajo, inspired, in turn, by Gamoneda). Kratevas did in fact, exist, but he remains a relatively obscure figure outside of botanical history.

The works that Gamoneda attributes to Kratevas are absent from the list of sources that he offers on pages 14 and 15 of his own prologue. Other reference works state that Kratevas (more often cited as Krateuas or Crateuas) has left no extant works, and owes his authorial survival to the writings of Dioscorides himself: the illustrations in some early manuscripts of Dioscorides' *Materia medica* are thought to be copied from Kratevas's illustrated herbal, one of the earliest works of its kind in the Western tradition. Dioscorides also quotes the earlier writer in his treatise, although not, significantly, in the section that Gamoneda appropriates for *Libro de los venenos*. There is a manuscript of Dioscorides in Vienna; there was also, at one time, a codex in Venice attributed by some scholars to Krateuas, but apparently it no longer exists. The Roman general Pompey did defeat Mithridates, and the Vatican does possess secret archives, but the existence of this particular codex, and Gamoneda's access to it, seem highly improbable.

There are additional grounds for suspicion. Gamoneda speaks of Kratevas as “autor [...] de un *Léxico botánico*, de un *Tratado de los simples* y de otros escritos *cuya existencia defiendo*” (the author of a *Botanical Lexicon*, of a *Treatise on Simples* and of other writings whose existence I defend) (12; emphasis added). The first work mentioned here did exist at one point, and was consulted by Dioscorides and other ancient pharmacologists. *Tratado de los simples*, which in Latin would be *De simplicibus* (Concerning simple [medicines]), is a generic title used for more than a few ancient and medieval works, including one sometimes attributed to Dioscorides himself. The other writings whose existence Gamoneda defends would include his principal source, the codex presumably extant in the Vatican Library. Gamoneda's research, in any case, is impossible to reproduce, since he made use of “tratados y citas de enésima mano, procedentes de más autores de los que soy capaz de manejar con algún método. Unos se me dieron en solemnísimos volúmenes, otros en capítulos o fragmentos traídos a cuento por segundones que no hacen al caso” (treatises and quotations from the nth hand, proceeding from the works of more writers than I am able to manage with any method. Some were given to me in weighty tomes, other in chapters or fragments brought to me by third parties who aren't worth mentioning) (14).

Aside from this deliberate bibliographical obfuscation, the tales that the poet attributes to Kratevas are simply “too good to be true,” too infused with a particularly modern sensibility, especially given the fact that no other commentator has remarked on this dimension of Kratevas's writing. The extended account of some hallucinogenic mushrooms obtained by Kratevas from Tartar shamans, for example, strains credulity (99–104). Of course, there are many tales of cruelty in Greek and Roman authors. What is specifically modern in the narrative perspective of “Kratevas” is the morbid and eerily amoral tone with which he observes medical symptoms. Although cruel in his actions, he is not wholly insensitive to suffering, and occasionally tries to put sufferers out of their misery. At the same time, he never expresses remorse for having caused the suffering in the first place. As a result his perspective is multilayered and unpredictable.

Andrés Laguna has the last word in Gamoneda's book, with a warning that there is “*una fiera doméstica y familiar, mucho más virulenta que todas, quiero decir del hombre, de cuya viperina lengua, a veces sin ser sentida, se derrama una ponzoña tan peligrosa y mortal que ni el metridato ni la triaca perfecta bastan para remediar sus daños*” (a domestic and familiar beast, much more virulent than all the rest, I mean man, from whose viperous tongue, at times without being noticed, there is spilled a venom so dangerous and mortal that neither *mithrididate* nor a perfect opiate are sufficient to remedy its harms) (211; italics in original). I have already contrasted this humanist perspective with that of the more pragmatic Dioscorides, who might not have understood Laguna's insistence that his own

book owes its existence to human evil: "*Si los hombres mantuviesen entre sí aquella fe y hermandad entre las más feroces y bravas fieras [...], Dioscórides no tuviera ocasión de añadir este de los venenos mortíferos a los de su autoridad*" (If men could maintain among themselves that perfect faith and fraternity amid the most wild and ferocious beasts ... Dioscorides would not have had to add this book on deadly poisons to those of his authority) (32; italics in original). From the ancient perspective, after all, poisoning can just as easily result from the *accidental* encounter between the human and the natural worlds: "Conviene también mirar en la profundidad del vino, tras el olor del cual suelen ir estas serpientes que, muchas veces, por beberlo, vomitan en él su ponzoña o, cayendo dentro, murieron ellas y causaron la muerte de los tristes que después bebieron" (It is a good idea also to peer into the depths of the wine, the odor of which attracts serpents who often, having drunk it, vomit their poison back into it or, falling inside, died themselves and caused the death of the unfortunate ones who drank it) (22). The apocryphal "Kratevas" is a third voice in this "ethical" conversation, one who speaks in vivid and cruel terms of the relationship between human suffering and the natural world.

If the codex of *Kratevas* is the invention of the twentieth-century Spanish poet, as I have concluded to be the case, then Gamoneda's own contribution to *Libro de los venenos* is more substantial than it would appear to the casual reader: Gamoneda, not *Kratevas*, becomes the spell-binding narrator of the legendary history of Mithridates, the despot who reputedly built up his immunity to poisoning by ingesting increasing amounts of toxic substances over the course of his lifetime. Gamoneda also becomes the artificer of the fictional game, the inventor and translator of an imaginary work designed to complement his quasi-scientific investigation into poisonous plants and "fieras que arrojan de sí ponzoña." Although he repeatedly warns that the work he is presenting is poetry rather than science, he does not explicitly warn the reader that his tales from *Kratevas* are fictional in the more literal sense. It is possible, then, for the reader to listen to Gamoneda's repeated insistence that his interest is primarily aesthetic, that he gives no value scientific knowledge per se, that he has modified and corrupted Laguna's text, and *still* overestimate the philological and scientific reliability of the work. It requires more than a few hours of library research to sort out the tangle of references that Gamoneda puts forward, more time than most readers would be likely to invest.⁸ Also, one accustomed to Gamoneda's other works would not expect a flight of Borgesian invention from this usually sober and unironic poet.⁹

The poetic effects of *Libro de los venenos*, then, are multiple, resulting, in the first place, from the heteroglossic juxtaposition of four distinct voices, each with its own personality and perspective. This play of perspectives can be quite dazzling. In one case we have Gamoneda (in his role as scientist?) disputing

both Dioscorides and Laguna on the poisonous properties of all mushrooms, and then launching into a detailed account of Kratevas's experience with mind-altering mushrooms. While each of these four voices maintains a distinct perspective, all share the common jargon of archaic botany. Indeed, the most striking feature of the text is its multi-layered, historically resonant, and defamiliarizing *language*, the result of the translation and transmission of the text from the pseudo-Dioscorides to Laguna to Gamoneda.

Ezra Pound defined *logopeia* (one of the three fundamental ways of "charging language with meaning") as "the dance of the intellect among words" (25). This technique, according to Pound, is the latest to develop and the most resistant to translation.¹⁰ The *logopeia* of the original text obviously cannot survive translation, since what is at stake is the use of particular words *as words*. At the same time, translation also generates *logopeia* by exerting pressure on the target language. This is the effect noted by Rudolf Pannwitz, in an observation quoted in Walter Benjamin's classic essay "The Task of the Translator": "The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (qt. in Benjamin 81). *Logopeia* also arises in the process by which a text is transformed by the passage of time, as Gamoneda himself observes à propos of Dioscorides: "Tengo para mí que el tiempo convierte el lenguaje simple y natural (tanto el culto como el popular) en lenguaje artístico; pienso que la lectura actual de un discurso arcaico se carga, en alguna medida, de función estética" (I believe that time converts simple and natural language (learned as well as popular) into artistic language; I think that the actual reading of an archaic discourse fulfills, in some way, an aesthetic function) (*El cuerpo de los símbolos* 125).¹¹

There is a central current in contemporary poetry that deliberately avoids excessive *logopeia* in favor of a neutral, almost colorless tone. Jaime Gil de Biedma's notion that the ideal language of poetry consists of "palabras de familia gastadas tibiamente" has many adherents (*Las personas del verbo* 39). The manipulation of "ordinary" language can be subtle and effective (as in Gil de Biedma's own poetry), but the idea that poetic language should be limited to "palabras de familia" forecloses the possibility of more adventurous experiments in *logopeia*.¹² In this respect, Gamoneda's prose commentary on a sixteenth-century translation of Dioscorides succeeds in "charging language with meaning" in ways that other contemporary poets often neglect.

Pound's definition of poetry as "charged language" does not pertain to any one genre of poetry, and can be applied to prose works as well. The language of *Libro de los venenos* is strongly imagistic, and thus exemplifies *phanopeia*, or the "casting of images on the visual imagination." Although written in prose, the work is not devoid of *melopeia* either. Gamoneda describes his revisions of Laguna's text in the following terms: "Pues bien, tengo que declarar 'corrupción' porque yo he

desviado la lengua de Laguna al profundizar en su *rhythmica*" (Well then, I have to declare [that my work is a] "corruption" because I have distorted the language of Laguna by exploring his *rhythmica* in depth) (12; emphasis in original). This intriguing statement implies that the transformation of the scientific text entails a process of drawing out, or making explicit, a rhythmic structure that is already inherent in the prose text. A paragraph on the dangers of mushrooms, from Laguna's commentary, illustrates this process. I have separated the passage into separate units in order to further bring out its structure:

Todos los hongos, por escogidos que sean, si se comen sin discreción, *dan la muerte ahogando*.

Siendo de naturaleza esponjosos, luego que entran en el estómago beben en sí todos los humores que hallan, con los cuales se hinchan de tal manera que no pueden ir ni atrás ni adelante, y, así, comprimen los instrumentos de la respiración, y, por este respecto, impidiendo el anhélito, *ahogan*.

Además, se dan suertes de hongos que no sólo con la cantidad, sino con la cualidad venenosa *despachan*, y de esta manera son todas los verdes, los azules y los violados, porque no sólo se hinchan comidos, sino que también se corrompen y, corrompiéndose, corroen los intestinos, y, al fin, *dan la muerte*.

Por donde el verdadero remedio es no gustarlos, sino tenerlos por sospechosos pues *traen la muerte consigo*. (97; emphasis added)

(All mushrooms, no matter how carefully selected, if eaten without discretion, produce death by drowning.

Being by nature spongy, when they enter the stomach they absorb all the humors they find, swelling with them in such a way that they can move neither forwards nor backwards, and, thus, they constrict the instruments of respiration and, in this respect, impeding breath, they drown.

Moreover, there are kinds of mushrooms that kill not only by their quantity but by their venomous quality, and this applies to all the green, blue and violet mushrooms, because not only do they swell up when eaten, but also they decay, and in decaying, they eat away the intestines, and, eventually, bring about death.

And hence the true remedy is not to taste them, but to hold them as suspicious since they bring death with them.)

The *rhythmica* of this passage has its roots in the rhetorical tradition, in which prose writers employed emphatic rhythmic figures such as *homoteleuton* (similar ending) and climax. A series of varied syntactic structures all build up to the same inexorable conclusion: mushrooms bring death. To a modern essayist, such a style might seem ponderous and redundant. For a modern *poet* (or reader of poetry), however, the effect is powerful and suggestive. Neither the older rhetorical tradition nor the modern practice of "poetic prose," with its origins in Baudelaire and Mallarmé, recognizes any *essential* difference between verse and prose. Gamoneda himself rarely writes in traditional verse: his other recent works are written either in long "versículos" or in "bloques rítmicos" that appear on the page as paragraphs of prose.

Another way of accounting for the aesthetic dimension of Gamoneda's text would be to look, not at the language per se, but at the entire imaginative landscape of medicinal herbs, poison-tipped arrows, scorpions, venomous serpents, bull's blood, rabid dogs, leeches, toads and toadstools, metallurgy, opiates, mythological beasts, suicides, tortures, assassinations and mercy killings, not to mention an "oriental despot."¹³ Underlying these picturesque elements of the text is an insistent concern with the physical dimension of human existence: pregnancy, miscarriage, birth, disease and cure, pain, aging, and death. From this perspective, the thematic link between *Libro de los venenos* and other major works like *Descripción de la mentira*, *Libro del frío*, and *Arden las pérdidas* would be an acute consciousness of the fragility of human life in relation to the physical world.

In "Poesía en la perspectiva de la muerte," a key essay included in *El cuerpo de los símbolos*, Gamoneda begins by defining poetry as "la creación de objetos de arte cuya materia es el lenguaje" (the creation of an art whose material is language) (23). Developing his argument with impeccable logic, he goes on to observe, following Machado, that poetry is a temporal art involving memory:

La temporalización posibilita una conducta "musical" del lenguaje, es decir, una *composición en el tiempo*. La composición es *sentida* por la memoria, es comprendida precisamente por la memoria de los sentidos. De otra manera: el discurso se hace *memorable* precisamente a causa de esta composición y es la memoria la que posibilita la existencia *física* del poema. (23; original emphasis)

(Temporality makes possible the "musical" behaviour of language, that is, a *composition in time*. This composition is *felt* by the memory, it is understood precisely by the memory of the senses. Put a little differently: the discourse is made *memorable* precisely because of this composition and it is memory which makes possible the physical existence of the poem.)

Memory, in turn, is "*conciencia de pérdida* (recuerdo lo que ya no tengo o lo que ya no es); conciencia, por tanto, de consunción del tiempo correspondiente a mi vida y, por esto mismo, *conciencia de ir hacia la muerte*" (*consciousness of loss* (I remember what I no longer have and what no longer exists); consciousness, then, of the consumption of the time corresponding to my life, and, thus, *consciousness of going toward death*) (24; original emphasis). What distinguishes Gamoneda's approach from the usual clichés surrounding the "theme of death" is the way in which he links his consciousness of mortality to the *physical*, material aspect of poetic language:

El lenguaje es básicamente oralidad (no obstante el silencio de la escritura o la memoria de la palabra, es decir, su existencia únicamente intelectual) y la oralidad es física. La composición poética, es decir, la composición del lenguaje en el tiempo fortalece (la hace estéticamente sensible) esta consistencia física que, por otra parte, es inseparable de la significación (el que ésta sea convencional-

mente clara, enigmática o paradójica es asunto irrelevante), que se "contamina" también de esta especial energía *sensible*. Por ello, las significaciones poéticas son sensibles antes que inteligibles: las significaciones *se sienten*; la sintaxis poética es una sintaxis para la sensibilidad. (24; original emphasis)

(Language is basically orality (despite the silence of writing or remembered speech, in other words, its purely intellectual existence) and orality is physical. Poetic composition, that is, the composition of language in time, fortifies (makes aesthetically perceptible) this physical consistency which, moreover, is inseparable from signification (whether this signification is conventionally clear, enigmatic, or paradoxical is an irrelevant factor), which is also contaminated by this specially *sensible* energy. Because of this, poetic significations are sensible before being intelligible: significations are felt; poetic syntax is a syntax for sensibility.)

It would be inaccurate or simplistic, then, to call death a "theme" in Gamoneda's work: rather, it is the consciousness of death that defines the basis of his art.

This definition of poetry applies equally well to *Libro de los venenos* and to Gamoneda's more traditionally "poetic" works. In a preface to *Libro del frío*, French hispanist and poet Jacques Ancet's quotes lines from this book that form part of the imaginative universe of Dioscorides and Laguna:

La infección es más grande que la tristeza; lame los parietales torturados, entra en los dormitorios del sudor y el láudano y luego tiembla como un ala fría: es la humedad de los agonizantes. (9)

(Infection is greater than sadness; it licks the tortured parietal bones, it enters the bedrooms of sweat and laudanum and then trembles like a cold wing: it is the dampness of the dying.)

"Poca es la poesía," writes Ancet, "que hace sentir con tanta intensidad y precisión este hacer frente a la degradación y el sufrimiento físicos mediante la densidad casi orgánica de imágenes venidas de un imaginario que se nutre de materias médicas y tratados de fisiología" (It is rare to find a poetry that makes us feel with such intensity and precision the process of facing physical degradation and suffering, with images arising from an imaginative repertory nourished on pharmaceutical and medical treatises) (9). Other passages from *Libro del frío* confirm this insight:

Aceite azul sobre tu lengua, semillas negras en tus venas. En los últimos símbolos, ves la pureza sin significado.

Es la ebriedad de la vejez: luz en la luz. Alcohol sin esperanza. (115)

(Blue oil on your tongue, black seeds in your veins. In the last symbols, you see purity without meaning.)

It is the drunkenness of old age: light in light. Alcohol without hope.)

Such substances, “blue oil” and “black seeds,” could be unidentified toxins right out of Dioscorides’ treatise. *Libro del frío* employs such substances for their *symbolic* value, seeming to neglect the empirical reality that dominates *Libro de los venenos*. Yet this distinction between the figural and the literal, or between the poetic and the scientific use of language, is impossible to sustain, since *Libro de los venenos* employs its scientific sources to aesthetic ends. Behind the abstractions of *Libro del frío*, by the same token, lies a consciousness of material reality. The reader of *Libro de los venenos* is led from the literal to the symbolic, whereas in Gamoneda’s other poetic works a seemingly more abstract, symbolic language depends upon a material substratum.¹⁴ Both procedures, however, are equally figurative and thus equally *poetic*. It could be argued that *Libro de los venenos*, with its vivid writing, attention to physical detail, and complex *logopeia*, actually charges language with meaning more intensely than most conventional books of poetry written in verse.

In arguing that *Libro de los venenos* is a work of poetry I am not making a claim about its genre per se. In fact, it could just as easily be called a “novela,” as Gamoneda himself suggests in this introduction. To redefine the work as “fiction” rather than poetry, however, does not resolve the problem, since poetry itself is an “art consacré aux fictions” (Mallarmé) or a “supreme fiction” (Stevens).¹⁵ Following Gamoneda’s suggestion that “los llamados géneros no son otra cosa que poesía diversamente preparada” (the so-called genres are nothing but poetry variously prepared), we might propose that a poet is a writer who conceives of language in poetic terms, not the practitioner of any particular form or genre of writing. While *Libro de los venenos*, Gamoneda’s most experimental book, is least definable in generic terms, it is also the one in which the poetic function of language is most fully realized.

Notes

- 1 The best introduction to Gamoneda’s work is Miguel Casado’s preliminary study to *Edad*.
- 2 John M. Riddle, the leading scholar in this field, does not recognize the sixth book to be authentic (personal correspondence). Riddle’s 1985 book is the most complete and rigorous treatment of Dioscorides as scientist and writer. There is no evidence that Gamoneda had access to this scholarship, and I will continue to refer to “Dioscorides” as though he were the author of the text translated by Laguna.
- 3 I cannot vouch for the scientific accuracy of my translations. I have left some terms untranslated rather than searching for sometimes elusive or non-existent English equivalents. The translation of the entire text of Gamoneda’s work would be a herculean task.
- 4 The Italian Mathiolo was another significant translator of Dioscorides in the early modern period. I have consulted two editions of Laguna’s *Pedacio Dioscorides Anarzabeo, acerca de la materia medicinal, y de los venenos mortíferos...* in the Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas. Sally Haines of the Spencer Library was helpful in providing information necessary to the completion of this article, as was Susan Case of the Anschutz Library.

Stephen J. Greenberg, of the National Library of Medicine, also confirmed my suspicion that there are no surviving works by "Kratevas," aside from a few fragments incorporated in Wellmann—a work I have not been able to consult first hand.

- 5 I believe, however, that such condescension would be a severe mistake: far preferable is Riddle's approach to Dioscorides as a serious empirical scientist worthy of our respect and admiration.
- 6 Lacking all such expertise myself, I approached the text as any other lay reader might. A full account of the scientific lexicon of *Libro de los venenos* is a task for another scholar. Gamoneda himself occasionally confesses his ignorance as to the identity of certain substances.
- 7 I have compared a few passages of Gamoneda to Laguna's original. Gamoneda's alteration and modernization are readily apparent, although I feel he captures the flavor of Laguna's sixteenth-century prose. A typical change might be *natura* / *naturaleza*.
- 8 I myself have consulted more scholarly works than would be necessary for a purely "poetic" enjoyment of the text. Very little of my research can shed any direct light on Gamoneda's book, since my main finding is that the poet's "scholarship" is deliberately misleading.
- 9 I agree with the widespread view that Gamoneda is not a ludic or ironic poet. In *Libro de los venenos*, in fact, he passes up on numerous opportunities for ironic commentary. Yet when he does speak tongue-in-cheek the results are all the more subtle, since he avoids blatant "guñíos de ojo."
- 10 This is the purely *verbal* aspect of the poetic art: "It holds the aesthetic content which is peculiarly the domain of verbal manifestation, and cannot possibly be contained in plastic or in music" (Pound 25).
- 11 In one of two essays devoted to Laguna in *El cuerpo de los símbolos*: "El *Dióscorides*, de Laguna" (121–25) and "Otra vez, Laguna" (127–39).
- 12 Gil de Biedma does not actually limit himself to such "palabras de familia": his verbal surfaces are quite varied.
- 13 The figure of Mithridates in Gamoneda's text is an easily identifiable cultural archetype (or stereotype): the cruel and sensual "Oriental Despot."
- 14 While some readers view his poetry as abstract and even surrealist, Gamoneda has always insisted that his symbols are, in the first instance, actual physical objects. Miguel Casado argues—convincingly to my mind—that Gamoneda's abstractions, "grandes palabras," acquire a more concrete value, "pues hay una elaboración y un movimiento constante de todas ellas, un desvío o un matiz de todas ellas: cada una está dibujada de nuevo" (*La poesía como pensamiento* 111).
- 15 See Guest, "Poetry the Supreme Fiction" (*Forces of the Imagination*). "Fiction" also implies narrative, but, of course, Gamoneda is also a narrative poet: "Si a esto, en mis últimas fases, añadimos la casi siempre presente narratividad, se me podrá creer si digo que, progresivamente, experimento una pérdida de conciencia respecto al género literario en que me muevo (creo que esta experiencia no es nueva ni excepcional), y que esta pérdida me induce a una gloriosa confusión sobre si existirán o no los géneros; o sobre si todos los géneros serán poéticos; o sobre si, más felizmente perdido aún, estaré o no adentrándome en el aristotélico género que 'carece de nombre'" (*El cuerpo de los símbolos* 29).

PART THREE

Women Poets of the 1980s and 1990s

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gender Under Erasure (Amparo Amorós, Luisa Castro)

Es que no no me considero, ni me he considerado nunca, exactamente una mujer.

(The thing is I don't consider myself, nor have I ever considered myself, precisely a woman.)

—Blanca Andreu (Ugalde 248)

The most cursory look at the best-known anthologies and critical studies of twentieth-century Spanish poetry reveals an overwhelmingly male canon: women poets, when they appear at all, are treated as minor figures or as problematic exceptions. The so-called “boom” in the publication of women’s poetry in the 1980s, then, represents a fundamental alteration in the literary landscape.¹ The vitality of contemporary women poets stands in sharp contrast to the rather pallid neo-conservative aesthetics of some of their most prominent male counterparts.² While general anthologies of contemporary Spanish poetry tend to remain almost exclusively male, it is clear that these compilations do not represent the real strengths of contemporary Spanish poetry.³

Critics who have studied recent poetry written by women have tended to assume that it is a gendered form of writing, a mode of poetic discourse that attempts to express a specifically feminine experience or identity. This assumption, derived from the “gynocriticism” of Elaine Showalter and other feminist critics, guides Sharon Keefe Ugalde in her interviews with women poets in *Conversaciones y poemas: la nueva poesía española en castellano*, a book which has become one of the most useful critical tools available for the study of recent Spanish poetry.⁴ It is an assumption, however, that is not shared by the majority of poets interviewed by Ugalde. When asked about the viability of an “estética femenina” a good number of these poets respond by rejecting the very notion. María Victoria Atencia questions the arbitrary dichotomy between masculine and feminine characteristics: “Pero sólo atribuyendo al hombre o a la mujer ciertas características que no le son exclusivamente propias, podríamos considerar como masculina o femenina una obra en que estas características se reflejan” (Only by attributing certain characteristics to man or woman which

are not exclusively their own, can we consider masculine or feminine a work in which these characteristics are reflected) (8). Amparo Amorós appeals to the androgynous quality of the creative mind (82), while Blanca Andreu considers “la poesía femenina” to be “un estorbo repugnante con sus sentimientos tan imbuidos, falsos, tópicos” (feminine poetry [...] a repugnant obstacle, with its sentiments that are so pervasive, so false, so clichéd) (250).⁵

While some of the women interviewed assent to weak or carefully qualified statements about the “femininity” of their writing, the majority do not actively choose to define their poetry in this way. (A few, however, do explicitly define themselves as feminists.) Some reactions against the idea of feminine writing are quite strong. Blanca Andreu has a difficult time identifying herself as a woman in the first place (248). Rosa Romojaro goes so far as to efface the signs of gender from her poetic voice, so that the speaker of the poem can be imagined as either male or female: “Más que la ambigüedad, lo que he intentado es hacer una poesía valedera para cualquier tipo de voz. O, al menos, poder funcionar cuando quisiera como voz masculina” (Rather than ambiguity, what I’ve tried to do is create a poetry valid for any type of voice. Or, at least, one that is able to function, when I want it to, as a masculine voice) (116).

If the purpose of interviews with contemporary writers is to gain insight into their own understanding of their work, we should perhaps take these poets at their word when they dissociate themselves from the idea of a specifically female tradition. The explanation that Ugalde herself offers for her subjects’ rejection of “feminine poetry” or “feminine aesthetics” is the stigma that has traditionally been attached to such labels: poetry written by women has been defined by the male literary establishment as (in the words of Amparo Amorós) “sentimentaloide y, en ocasiones, blandengue o cursi” (sentimental and, on occasions, soggy or kitschy) (ix). For Ugalde, then, the attitude of Spanish poets is motivated by a fear of being associated with an outmoded definition of women’s poetry:

El resultado de la perpetuación de una definición limitante es que las poetas españolas siguen preocupadas con distanciarse de ella. Persiste una actitud defensiva comparada con la que predomina entre las poetas europeas [*sic*] y norteamericanas, quienes han entrado en una fase constructiva definiendo ellas mismas lo que es la poesía femenina. (x)

(The result of the perpetuation of a limiting definition is that Spanish poets remain concerned with distancing themselves from it. A defensive attitude persists compared to that which is predominant among European [*sic*] and North-American poets, who have entered into a constructive phase, defining for themselves what feminine poetry is.)

The negative connotations of “poesía femenina” certainly provide powerful motivation for rejecting the label altogether. To see this rejection as a purely

defensive gesture, however, is to relegate much of the best poetry written by contemporary Spanish women to a less advanced stage of feminist consciousness. Ugalde simply takes for granted that the ultimate goal of women poets is or ought to be the creation of a truer variety of “*poesía femenina*,” one that would give voice to an “*identidad femenina auténtica*” (authentic female identity) (x). Yet the poets she interviews do not attempt to distinguish between an outmoded definition of “*poesía femenina*” and the feminist revision of this concept that is proposed to them: most show little interest in the search for an “authentic” identity based on their gender.

Instead of attempting to redefine femininity in a less stigmatizing fashion, then, a significant number of younger Spanish poets of the 1980s prefer to place the mark of gender under erasure.⁶ While this strategy might appear to be limiting or defensive, even anti-feminist, it could be argued that Spanish poets have valid reasons for their lack of interest in a feminine identity, especially when this identity is defined in essentialist terms. In my view, their refusal to define their work as “*poesía femenina*” reflects, not a lack of feminist consciousness, but rather a well-founded suspicion of conventional gender categories.

This is not to deny the importance of gender for the interpretation of contemporary Spanish poetry: some women continue to write within a style that has been historically defined as “feminine” (María Victoria Atencia, *Pureza Canelo*), even as they express skepticism about the existence of a feminine aesthetic. Poets like Ana Rossetti and Andrea Luca explore female sexuality in a way that would never be confused with “masculine writing.” What is significant, though, is the fairly consistent rejection of the politics of identity among the younger Spanish poets interviewed by Ugalde. Blanca Andreu, for example, sharply differentiates her personal identity from her interest in women: “El mundo de la mujeres me interesa mucho, pero me interesa por lo que tiene de distinto a lo que es mi persona y mi mundo” (I’m very interested in the world of women, but I’m interested in it because of its difference from my own self and my world) (249).

The suspicion of gender voiced by contemporary Spanish poets calls into question one of the fundamental tenets of “gynocriticism”: the grounding of literary works written by women in female identity. At the same time, the attempt to efface, to bypass, or to transcend gender raises some difficult questions about the relation between gender and writing: Is gender an unavoidable attribute of writing? Is it possible to write in a neutral or genderless mode without simply reproducing dominant forms? What are the implications of such “neutral” writing for feminist criticism? In order to elucidate these and related questions, I have chosen to discuss the work of two well-known poets who began to publish in the 1980s. The work of Amparo Amorós tends to reproduce the aesthetic values of the predominately male canon of twentieth-century Spanish poetry. Luisa Castro, in contrast, follows an alternative, avant-garde

poetic tradition that deliberately blurs the distinction between “masculine” and “feminine” modes of writing.⁷

Amparo Amorós: Universality, Modernist Aesthetics, and the Canon

One important current within feminist criticism has championed writing by women as the expression of an authentic identity. Writing that does not appear to express its author’s gender has often been criticized for its lack of authenticity: when women write in modes traditionally reserved for men’s writing, they are said to be writing “like men.” Other feminist writers, nevertheless, have questioned this logic, arguing that it is a mistake to define women’s writing as a function of “femininity,” whether this category is defined in conventional or in feminist terms. Monique Wittig makes this point quite forcefully in an essay entitled “The Point of View: Universal or Particular”: “‘Feminine writing’ is the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal fact of the domination of women, and as such it enlarges the apparatus under which ‘femininity’ presents itself: that is, Difference, Specificity, Female Body/Nature” (59–60). Gender itself, according to this line of thinking, is a mark of oppression applied only to women: “There is only one [gender]: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine but the general” (60). Wittig goes on to propose a different strategy for women’s writing: not the celebration of women’s difference, but the reconquest of the “universal” point of view traditionally reserved for men.

The rejection of “feminine poetry” among contemporary Spanish poets obeys a similar logic: the segregation of women’s poetry from the mainstream (predominantly male) tradition is perceived to be intrinsically limiting and stigmatizing. Amparo Amorós reports that Vicente Aleixandre and Carlos Bousoño responded to her poetry with surprise: “Nos ha interesado mucho tu poesía, porque *no* parece escrita por una mujer” (We were very interested in your poetry, because it does *not* seem written by a woman) (Ugalde 81; original emphasis). This anecdote obviously reveals the preconceptions of Aleixandre and Bousoño about women’s poetry! If Amorós’s poetry does not seem to be that of a woman, it is because intellectual complexity is not considered to be a “feminine” trait. The anecdote also suggests, however, that her work satisfies the dominant aesthetic criteria of the male literary world: Aleixandre was, at the time, the most celebrated poet living in Spain, while Bousoño remains to this day the most influential critic and theorist of poetry.

Many of Amorós’s poems conjure up the distinctive styles of the best-known male poets of the century. The following fragment from *El fuego pensativo*, for example, is strongly reminiscent of Juan Ramón Jiménez’s prose poem “Espacio”:

Por más que te conozco más te ignoro y esa es tu infinitud. Cuando acabe mi búsqueda de ti será la muerte y en la mía hallarás respuesta, acabamiento: al apagarse mi vigilia te cerrará la boca. (Amorós 176)

(The more I know you the more ignorant I am of you and that is your infinity. When my search for you is over it will be death and in my death you will find an answer, an ending: as it is extinguished, my wakefulness will close your mouth.)

Several poems from the book *Árboles en la música* employ a tone characteristic of the poetry of Claudio Rodríguez:

Como aquél que guarda un secreto
pero es del viento apenas y no importa
salvo el tenerlo así, bien al recaudo,
robado a la miradas, defendido,
envuelta su certeza nada más
entre los puros gestos del sigilo
—rica caja vacía y bien lacrada
¿qué concede tenerte, qué me otorga
saberte poseída, muy adentro,
si nadie sabe y nada, al fin, contiene
cuando tanto me das? (“Herencia,” Amorós 170)

(Like he who keeps a secret
but it’s of the wind barely and nothing matters
save having it like this, well-protected,
stolen from gazes, defended,
its certainty enveloped in no more
than pure gestures of secretiveness,
a rich box empty and well lacquered,
what advantage is there to having you? What does it grant me
to know you possessed, very much within,
if no one knows and ultimately you contain nothing
when you give me so much?)

The stylistic and thematic echoes in this passage are striking. It is easy to identify the trademarks of Rodríguez’s style: a long, sinuous sentence extends over fluid hendecasyllables, culminating in a plaintive rhetorical question. Colloquial phrases like “bien al recaudo” and “muy adentro” jump off the page: no other Spanish poet modifies prepositions as frequently as Rodríguez. The ethical and epistemological preoccupations of the author of *Alianza y condena* are evident in the vocabulary employed—*secreto*, *miradas*, *gestos*, *certeza*, *saber*—and in the condemnation of egoism: the male figure who attempts to keep his secret to himself is left holding an empty box.

These fairly obvious stylistic and thematic echoes have the effect of making Amorós’s work appear to form part of the canon as it already exists, since a reader who is already familiar with canonical works would not be obliged to

modify his or her expectations. (Of course, the other possible response is to dismiss Amorós as a largely derivative poet.) Even when it does not follow a single identifiable model, Amorós's poetic style evokes the aspirations and aesthetic values of the "great" poets of the century: mastery of versification, complexity of poetic language and thought, linguistic self-consciousness, and thematic ambitiousness. If these literary values seem utterly non-controversial, it is precisely because they are so well established. Even the shift from "modernism" to "postmodernism" does not effect a fundamental change in the prevailing definition of "great" poetry: Machado and Jiménez, the poets of the Generation of 1927, the 1950s group (Rodríguez, Valente, Brines), *novísimos* such as Gimferrer, Carnero, Siles, and Colinas—all of these male poets fully satisfy "modernist" criteria for entry into the canon.⁸

Amparo Amorós is arguably the first woman to be admitted into this all-male club on an equal footing, although I am not wholly convinced that her presence in the canon will be permanent. The blurbs on the jacket of *Visión y destino*, from prominent poets and critics like Andrew Debicki, José Olivio Jiménez, Jaime Siles, and José Luis Cano, attest to the canonical status already accorded Amorós's work at a relatively early date. The language of these blurbs effectively canonizes her through an appeal to such loaded values as originality, transcendence, vision, and essence. José Olivio Jiménez discerns "la marca de la gran poesía" (the mark of great poetry) while Vicente Gallego defines the process by which raw experience is transformed into poetic vision: "La poesía parte de la experiencia, trascendiéndola, convirtiéndose en visión, en iluminación... El misterio del hombre y la esencia última del lenguaje" (Poetry begins with experience, transcending it, converting it into vision, into illumination... The mystery of man and the ultimate essence of language"). Amorós's place within the canon, however, immediately raises the question of gender, since the values that have defined "la gran poesía" have been implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) coded as "masculine."⁹ The reaction of Aleixandre and Bousño to her work illustrates the point: the result of the identification of modernist aesthetic values with men's literature is that a woman who adopts these values will appear to be writing in a mode that is neither feminine nor female.

Is Amorós's poetry, then, a masculine masquerade? There are several ways of resolving this question. One would be to search her work for poems that are susceptible to a feminist reading. This would be a partial solution at best, since it would arbitrarily privilege themes that are not necessarily central to her poetics. A more convincing alternative, to my mind, would be to rethink the identification between the modernist mode and masculine writing. To categorize aesthetic values such as ambitiousness and complexity of poetic language as intrinsically, rather than contingently, masculine is both arbitrary and limiting: the effect is to exclude women from the canon of modern poetry through an

a priori notion of how women write.¹⁰ The fact that modern poets who have satisfied canonical criteria are almost all men has more to do with women's limited access to writing than with the inherent masculinity of these criteria. By adopting a style traditionally defined as masculine, Amorós's poetry obliges the critic to reconsider his or her preconceptions about "masculine" and "feminine" modes of writing. Her aim is not to redefine feminine or female writing, then, but to abolish the category in order to gain access to a more "universal" mode historically reserved for male poets.

Amparo Amorós's strategy for entering the predominantly male canon of twentieth-century Spanish poetry is an arguably conservative one, since it reinforces the aesthetic values that have shaped this canon. The charge of aesthetic conservatism, however, applies with equal validity to many of Amorós's male contemporaries, who have also tended to imitate established models instead of striking out in new directions. The larger question raised by the neo-conservative poets of the 1980s is whether the modernist literary mode in which they are working is still a compelling one. Amorós's work is an accomplished contribution to the canon, but for this very reason it does not represent a radically new departure for contemporary Spanish poetry.

Luisa Castro: Gender as Masquerade

Like Amparo Amorós, Luisa Castro prefers to consider herself as a "writer" rather than a "woman writer." She uses the masculine forms *escritor* and *escritores* to describe the aspirations of her own generation of poets:

No creo que las mujeres que ahora se plantan delante de la máquina de escribir se planten con esa pretención parcial de curar heridas y de hacerse un hueco dentro de las mujeres escritoras, sino dentro del panorama de los escritores. Es lo principal y lo advierto en todas mis colegas, Ana Rossetti, Almudena Guzmán, Andrea Luca, en todas. No veo en ninguna de ellas ese sentimiento parcial de escritora, sino todo lo contrario, de escritor. (292)

(I don't believe that the women who today sit down in front of the typewriter sit down with that partial intention to heal wounds and to make a space for themselves among women writers, but rather in the panorama of writers. This is the main thing and I notice it in all my colleagues, Ana Rossetti, Almudena Guzmán, Andrea Luca, in all of them. I don't see in any of them that partial feeling of being a *female* writer, but just the opposite, being a *writer*.)

Castro's dismissal of a possible feminist agenda ("esa pretención parcial de curar heridas") is somewhat facile. Moreover, her acceptance of the linguistic norm that identifies the masculine with the universal is highly problematic. For Castro, clearly, *escritores* means writers in general, while *escritoras* designates the subcategory of women writers with their inherently "partial" concerns. At the

same time, she does not feel herself excluded from this universality: she places her own work, along with that of the other poets mentioned, at the center of the current literary scene, without referring to her male contemporaries at all.

In contrast to Amorós's conservative aesthetic stance, Luisa Castro's attitude toward the literary tradition is a good deal less reverential. Her poetry does not evoke the voices of modernist masters like Juan Ramón Jiménez and Jorge Guillén. Instead, it follows the more explicitly avant-garde current that has been associated in recent years with younger poets such as Blanca Andreu. The most salient characteristics of this style, which dominates the poetry selected in Buenaventura's *Las diosas blancas*, include metrical freedom, an irreverent, self-dramatizing, and at times shocking tone, and the use of "irrational" imagery.

While Castro does not write in a female or feminine mode, her style cannot be identified with any specifically masculine tradition either. Her poetry, unlike that of Amorós, does not seek to transcend gender by appealing to "universal" values such as vision, transcendence, and essence. Instead, it playfully and deliberately subverts gender categories. Castro's subversion of gender can certainly be read as a feminist gesture, since gender is the mark of women's oppression. Nevertheless, her attitude toward femininity remains fundamentally at odds with those versions of feminism that ground themselves in the authenticity of female identity. If gender is an inherently oppressive category, then it cannot also serve as the basis for a more authentic identity.¹¹

Los versos del eunuco, a book awarded the first "Premio de Poesía Hiperión" in 1986, illustrates Castro's gender play at its most daring. The eunuch of the title is the poetic speaker's alter-ego. At times he is a third-person character or an interlocutor. In section three of the book, which bears the title "Los versos del eunuco," there are five poems written entirely in capital letters in which the eunuch himself speaks in oracular tones. In the initial poem in this section, the speaker explain the relation between her own poetic voice and that of the eunuch:

Un eunuco me escribe versos, versos
de muerte, versos de palo,
versos de almendro para jueces y palestras.

Un eunuco me escribe versos verdecidos
con un poco de higuera y de cangrejo,
versos
libres,
que dicen cosas grandes. (29)

(A eunuch writes verses for me, verses
of death, verses of club,
verses of almond trees for judges and arenas.

The eunuch writes me verses turned green
 with a little bit of fig-tree and crab,
 free
 verses,
 that tell of great things.)

The poet's voice, then, has its origins not in her personal identity, but in a quasi-masculine figure who dictates her verses to her. The introduction of this alternative speaker has a liberating effect, allowing the poet to free herself from all inhibitions in order to write "versos / libres / que dicen cosas grandes."

Significantly, Castro's eunuch cannot be classified as either female or male in the traditional sense. As a castrated and therefore non-phallic man, he escapes from all gender categories. At times he brandishes plastic phalli and at other times he is feminized: "Sus dimensiones habían empequeñecido adaptándose a las formas femeninas con la sinuosa cadera, con los pechos oscilantes" (His dimensions had been reduced, adapting themselves to feminine forms, with a sinuous hip and bouncing breasts) (51). This eunuch cries out for a psychoanalytic reading. To my mind, however, Castro's treatment of such concepts such as penis envy and castration anxiety is parodic rather than serious in intent. In "ÁBREME EL MUÑÓN A VER QUÉ TENGO DENTRO," for example, she imaginatively enters the eunuch's wound in an effort to decipher its mystery:

Mientras una piara de culos rosa nos espía detrás del mundo rojo de la tarde,
 a ver qué tiene dentro, me dijo, ábreme a ver, a ver toma la copa rota, a ver qué
 tiene dentro.

De modo que me dispuse a entrar con vidrio y vimos caer la sangre blanca al
 suelo blanco del lavabo y conocimos los ojos del dolor de los que no aman. (16)

(While a pink herd of assholes spies on us from behind the red world of the
 afternoon, let's see what it has inside, he said to me, open me up to see, let's see,
 take that shattered goblet, let's see what's inside of it.)

So that I determined to enter with glass and we saw the white blood fall to the
 white floor of the bathroom and we came to know the painful eyes of those who
 do not love.)

Ultimately, she discovers that there no enigma to resolve: "¡Ay!, sé bien que nada
 esconde esta guadaña..." (Ay, I know well that this scythe hides nothing).

Since both men and women are subject to "castration" in the psychoanalytic sense of the term, Castro's eunuch can be seen in two ways: he is a parody of masculinity, a man with a precarious, missing, or artificial phallus, but he is also a parody of psychoanalytic notions of femininity as castration or lack. *Los versos del eunuco*, according to this interpretation, mocks the Freudian conception of sexual difference, which is based on the presence or absence of the phallus.

If gender is a fundamentally arbitrary construct, then femininity is a social mask rather than the foundation for an authentic identity. Although the speaker

in Castro's poetry is more often than not explicitly identifiable as a woman, this identification is usually rather tenuous. "El cerdo" (the pig), a poem from *Los hábitos del artillero*, is one of the few in this collection in which the gender of the speaker is obvious:

Me habían puesto una falda nueva porque llegaba gente,
 el agua de colonia,
 rescatada de la profundidad de los armarios,
 resbalaba por mi frente
 una vez al año, por diciembre,
 tibia. (*Los hábitos del artillero* 19)

(They had put a new skirt on me because people were coming,
 the cologne,
 rescued from the depths of the dressers,
 slid down my forehead
 once a year, in December,
 warm.)

The speaker of the poem is clearly female, but her gender is discernible only from the external signs imposed upon her by an unspecified third-person plural subject: "una falda nueva" and "el agua de colonia." These traditionally feminine items, moreover, are only worn on special occasions in order to demonstrate the girl's gender to invited guests: they are the social mark of femininity rather than the expression of the speaker's own identity. She perceives them to be unusual, alien to her usual way of life, which is represented in the poem by the unforgettable slaughterhouse stench that pervades her entire household.

Beyond Gender?

Amparo Amorós and Luisa Castro exemplify two radically different approaches to the problem of gender. Amorós, protesting against preconceived notions about women's poetry, writes works designed to stand beside those of the canonical (male) poets of the century. Her conservative strategy inevitably raises the question of whether the canon of twentieth-century Spanish poetry is intrinsically masculine, of whether a woman writing within this canonical tradition is implicitly donning a male mask. Castro, on the other hand, turns her back on the canon in order to forge a more iconoclastic style. Her deliberate play with gender exposes femininity itself as a masquerade.

Despite these fundamental differences, both Amorós and Castro reject the idea and the practice of poetics grounded in a specifically feminine or female identity. Neither is an explicitly feminist poet. This is not to say that they should be read without reference to their gender: since they are actively engaged in the subversion of preconceived notions of masculinity and femininity, gender

is constantly at issue in their work. At the same time, however, the critic must approach their work without preconceptions about the shape that women's poetry will assume. While "gynocriticism" provides a useful framework for the study of poets who attempt to give expression to the specificity of female experience, it does not do justice to the work of poets who view gender categories as arbitrary and oppressive constructs.

My decision to devote the rest of this book to studies of women poets who came of age in the 1980s needs no special justification. While I think that specifically feminist readings of these women are still needed, I do not think that I am necessarily the person to perform this critical task: I prefer to study these poets as they themselves ask to be viewed, following the strategy of *universalization*. Of course, neither masculine nor feminine poetics are truly universal. The universal is simply the strategy by which one privileged group puts its own concerns into the forefront. To universalize the feminine, then, is not to make it masculine, but to treat it as completely unremarkable.

Notes

- 1 In his survey of recent Spanish poetry, Jaime Siles acknowledges the "importancia de la poesía escrita por mujeres, que son quienes modifican el sistema referencial de la última década" (142).
- 2 See Mayhew, *The Poetic of Self-Consciousness* 129–39 for a discussion of male poets of the 1980s.
- 3 Villena's two anthologies include a total of three women, García Martín's *La generación de los ochenta* a single woman, Julia Barella's compilation none at all. Ramón Buenaventura's *Las Diosas blancas* subjects contemporary women poets to an unapologetically masculinist gaze. The editor confesses to a sexual approach to art (10) and often comments extensively on his own reactions to the poets' physical appearance and personality.
- 4 See Ugalde, "Subversión y revisionismo" for a further explanation of her adaptation of Showalter's schema.
- 5 Similar statements can be found in *Conversaciones y poemas* 5, 116, and 292.
- 6 In order to be consistent with my own argument, I will refer to women poets simply as "poets" in the remainder of this essay, specifying the gender of male poets only.
- 7 For a good overview of the works of both Amorós and Castro see Wilcox.
- 8 Examples of poets who do *not* satisfy these canonical criteria are Gloria Fuertes and Leopoldo María Panero.
- 9 I elaborate this point in more detail in "Claudio Rodríguez and the Writing of the Masculine Body" and "'El signo de la feminidad': Gender and Poetic Creation in José Ángel Valente."
- 10 For a similar argument see Felski 19–50.
- 11 See Butler 1–6 for a relevant critique of "'Women' as the Subject of Feminism."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Desire Deferred: Ana Rossetti's *Punto umbrío*

Trovommi Amor del tutto disarmato
—Francesco Petrarca (39)

It is not hard to grasp the reasons for the keen interest sparked by the poetry of Ana Rossetti since the publication of *Los devaneos de Erato* in 1980. The attraction of her work has been both strong and immediate. While feminist critics have been especially interested in her play with gender categories, many readers have been drawn in by the powerful and explicit eroticism of her work. One significant source of appeal is Rossetti's appropriation of images from advertising and popular culture, as seen in her two best-known poems, "Chico Wrangler" and "Calvin Klein, underdrawers." Not least of all are the seductions of her lush, sensuous language.

While the appeal of Rossetti's work requires no explanation, this apparent immediacy has led to some notoriously superficial appreciations. She is too often presented to the reading public in rather unobvious ways, as evidenced by statements by two anthologists. For Mari Pepa Palomero, the poet's language is transparent and mimetic: "De tal manera que su mundo poético es abierto, libre, en ningún momento hay oscuridad, o contención, o hermetismo. Cada imagen creada tiene un referente erótico de inmediata interpretación" (Thus her poetic world is open, free; at no time is there obscurity, concealment, hermeticism. Each image created has an erotic referent that can be interpreted immediately) (411). This appeal to Rossetti's erotic directness can lead to even cruder stances: "Ana es un auténtico regalo para los pobres *heteros*, que tan escasos andamos de gratificación en los últimos decenios" (Ana is a true gift for us poor heterosexual men, who have received so little gratification in the last decades) (Buenaventura 64).

While other critical readings of Rossetti's work are more nuanced, many if not most still focus on the *frisson* produced by surface effect or by the reversal of readerly expectation.¹ In this view, supported by a reading of her erotic novels and short stories, Rossetti gives poetic voice to the *destape*, the explosion of sexual expression in the years following Franco's death and the lifting of

ensorship. Among the hierarchies that Rossetti calls into question is the privileging of depth over surface; thus it should come as no surprise that even the best criticism on her poetry has continued to emphasize the immediacy of its effects. What this sort of reading tends to overlook, however, is an awareness of language as *mediation*. Rossetti's poetic language, while seductive on its surface, still posits a certain distance between sign and referent; in the complexity of its signifying practice, it belies any ideal of transparent referentiality.

Punto umbrío, published in 1995, might lead the critic toward re-evaluation of Rossetti's poetic production, in part because it is markedly different from Rossetti's previous books.² In this book the focus of the poet's attention has shifted away from the seemingly unmediated eroticism of her earlier work toward a more profound exploration of desire as an inner experience.³ This inward turn links Rossetti's most recent book to what is arguably the central problem of the European lyric tradition: the relation between the desiring subject and the object of his or her desire. This book thus calls for a more traditional approach, one that once again privileges depth over surface. While this approach lacks the "immediate" appeal of approaches that emphasize Rossetti's subversiveness, my contention is that her originality is best understood in the context of the longstanding and enormously influential traditions of lyric poetry with which it engages.

Desire, in Western lyric poetry, is predicated on frustration, absence, and loss. In the model of object relations inherited from the Troubadours and from Petrarchism, the beloved is inaccessible almost by definition. While a late twentieth-century poet like Rossetti might appear quite distant from the conventions of medieval and renaissance love poetry, *Punto umbrío* demonstrates that the traditional model of the relation between desiring subject and the object of desire maintains a powerful hold over the poetic imagination. Some feminist critics have wanted to call Rossetti a subversive poet, arguing that she makes woman, rather than man, the object of erotic desire.⁴ This inversion of gender roles is a factor to be considered in Rossetti's earlier poetry, yet in *Punto umbrío* this explicitly feminist dimension becomes much less pronounced. Rossetti is concerned here with the psychological dynamics of desire, in a manner that intersects in revealing ways with treatments of this theme in prominent male poets such as Salinas, Cernuda, and Brines. This is not to rule out the possibility of feminist readings of this important work; the argument that Rossetti's approach to desire corresponds to a specifically female experience would be relatively easy to articulate. From my perspective as a male reader, however, her exploration of desire in this book does not bear the explicit mark of gender.

The role of language in mediating between subject and object plays a crucial role in Rossetti's poetics of desire. Language, when viewed as a mimetic simulacrum of reality, will inevitably seem insufficient. Yet this insufficiency

actually makes language the ideal medium for the mediation of desire, since desire itself arises from absence or lack. Language thus plays a double role in the Western poetic tradition: it creates a verbal simulacrum of the desired object and at the same time evinces its absence. Augustine's well-known account of the way he learned to speak places desire at the origin of language:

It was not that my elders taught me words (as, soon after, other learning) by any set method; but I, longing by cries and broken accents and various motions of my limbs to express my thoughts, that so I might have my will, and yet unable to express all that I willed, or to whom I willed, did myself, by the understanding which Thou, my God, gavest me, practise the sounds in my memory. (16)⁵

The temporality of language creates another duality much exploited in Western poetics. Language is an inherently temporal medium, yet poetic language strives to monumentalize or eternalize time. The effort to defeat temporality is evident in the lyric convention of the "eternal present," the moment of intense contemplation in which time appears to stand still, as well as in the *topos* that the well-made lyric poem works as a hedge against the ravages of time. Yet the awareness that such efforts must ultimately come up short creates an intense self-consciousness about the inherent duality of language.⁶ Once again, language both promises and defers the fulfillment of desire. It should be noted here that the "deconstructive" approach to poetry, in its insistence on the linguistic deferral of presence, echoes these traditional themes. From this perspective, deconstruction, still considered iconoclastic in some quarters, is strikingly attuned to the problematic of language and desire that stands at the heart of the Western poetic tradition.

Punto umbrío consists of a series of lyric moments that can also be read as a narrative sequence. This narrative, however, is not a linear one, since each of these moments is, in a sense, another approach to the same lyric moment. The first three poems in the book, marked by Roman numerals, provide a sort of prehistory of the "punto umbrío," which is identified in the first poem with a child's magical refuge: "Era un tiempo de infancia y la soledad prendía su bengala tras el escudo impenetrable del silencio. / Y el punto umbrío donde se cobijaba sólo era un mágico amparo para su terco y glorioso resplandor" (It was a time of childhood and solitude lit its torch behind the impenetrable shield of silence. / And the shadowy point where it took shelter was but a magic refuge for its stubborn and glorious radiance) (9). The second poem corresponds to adolescence, when this refuge becomes more explicitly sexual: "Era un tiempo adolescente e impreciso, el tiempo del amor sin nombre, hasta casi sin rostro, que merodeaba, como un beso prometido, por el punto más umbrío de la escalera" (It was an adolescent, imprecise time, the time of a nameless love, almost faceless, that lurked, like a promised kiss, in the darkest part of the stairwell) (11). In the third poem, this time undergoes another transformation, attaining the eternal present

that is so often the goal in European lyric poetry: “Nada se postergaba. Nada se anteponía: era un tiempo predestinado por un singular decreto, una hélice girando, confundiéndose en una rueda brillante e invisible / No era una edad ni una condición, sino el tiempo sin tiempo de la felicidad perfecta. Del acuerdo. De la inmóvil y sin medida duración del arrebató” (Nothing was postponed. Nothing was precipitous: it was a time predestined by a singular degree, a spinning helix, becoming confused in a brilliant and invisible wheel. / It was neither an age nor a condition, but the timeless time of perfect happiness. Of the agreement. Of the immobile and measureless duration of the rapture) (13).

The lyric moment, as defined in poem III, posits a perfect coincidence of time and event, desire and consummation. The subsequent poems in *Punto umbrío* problematize this eternal present. The fulfillment of desire comes either too soon or too late; or else the attainment of an eternal present leads only to sterility. Many of these poems begin by positing a problematic relation to time, or some attempt to manipulate its flow: “Pero, ahora, la lámpara vigila toda la noche, toda la noche, sin saber hasta cuándo debe durar su desazón” (But now the lamp keeps vigil all night, all night, without knowing how long its uneasiness will last) (15). “Y así, cada minuto, se alarga en lentos túneles / flotando en en el vacío” (And thus, every minute extends itself into slow tunnels / floating in the void) (17). “No quieras de hoy más que, dócil, el día cumpla su plazo” (Desire of today nothing more than that, tame, the day reach its end) (19). “Algún día hoy no habrá ocurrido” (Someday, today will not have occurred) (53).

Waiting for time to pass, attempting to make it pass more quickly or more slowly, stretching it out or contracting it, anticipating or deferring events, recapturing the past, imagining a “future perfect” in which the problem of desire will have been resolved—all of these attempted manipulations of time are responses to the impossibility of recovering the “punto umbrío” itself, which, in my reading of this book, is closely linked to the eternal present of traditional lyric poetry. The explicitly metapoetic texts in *Punto umbrío* confirm this hypothesis. In the following text the process of writing becomes antithetical to the goal being sought, since this process takes the writer further away from the very thing being sought:

AUN LA ESCRITURA DEJA ATRÁS sus renglones
 desatando su incontenible estela:
 impronta que reseca su lacada herida; sentimientos que
 se alejan hasta desvanecerse, hasta abismarse, veloces,
 en las ráfagas nubladas del principio.
 Conforme crece se empequeñecen sus vagones de carga
 precedera: imágenes que se convierten en reflejo;
 consignas que acumulan sus escombros, que domestican
 sus significados hasta que dejan de ser.
 Irreversiblemente, las palabras, mientras avanzan,

mientras se abren camino en el vacío, mientras su
 máquina demoledora persigue los instantes, van
 empapando, absorbiendo el agua de la clepsidra.
 Van acortando el lápiz, acelerando su consunción, al
 intentar organizar su pervivencia.
 Van desposeyéndose, transformándose, escapando, en
 tanto apresan y precisan y detienen.
 Pues seguir no es sino dejar atrás, pasar la llana al compás
 de los péndulos, ahondar la saeta en el último tramo,
 fingiendo desdeñar, o desmentir, el pacto que liga la
 fragilidad a la existencia. (27)

(Still, writing leaves behind its lines
 unleashing its uncontainable wake:
 an imprint that redries its lacquered wound; sentiments that
 move away until they disappear, until they sink into an abyss, rapid,
 in the clouded gusts of the beginning.
 As it grows its cars of perishable cargo
 become smaller: images that become reflection;
 party lines that accumulate their dregs, that domesticate
 their meanings until they no longer exist.
 Irreversibly, the words, as they advance,
 as they open a path in the void, while their
 destructive machine chases the instants, gradually
 sop up, absorb the water from the clepsydra.
 They slowly cut back the pencil, accelerating their consumption, trying
 to organize their survival.
 They slowly dispossess themselves, transforming themselves, escaping, while
 they capture and define and arrest.
 For continuing is nothing more than leaving behind, ironing out the beat
 of the pendulums, sinking the arrow in the last passage,
 pretending to disdain, or disprove, the pact that links
 fragility to existence.)

Writing is conceived metaphorically as a boat leaving a wake behind in the water (like Machado's "estelas en la mar"), as a train vanishing into the horizon, and as destructive machine for "killing time." Instead of retarding time, then, the poet's words accelerate it, even in the process of trying to "organizar su pervivencia," that is, to create a poetic form that defeats time. The traditional eternalizing function of poetic form appears in this poem, but only to be negated. Words capture something, it is true: "apresan y precisan y detienen." Yet this capacity to define and fix reality acquires no positive connotation in this context. Instead of being a hedge against time, writing is an ally of its destructiveness.

Another metapoetic text, "Por qué mi carne no te quiere verbo," links desire with its linguistic mediation, but in a rather puzzling way:

Por qué mi carne no te quiere verbo,
 por qué no te conjuga, por qué no te reparte,
 por qué desde las tapias no saltan buganvillas
 con tus significados
 y en miradas de azogue no reverbera el sol
 dando de ti noticia,
 ni se destapan cajas con tu música
 y su claro propósito,
 y ningún diccionario ajeno te interpreta.
 Por qué, por qué, Amor mío,
 eres mapa ilegible,
 flecha desorientada,
 regalo ensimismado en su intacto envoltorio,
 palabra indivisible que nace y muere en mí. (33)

(Why does my flesh not want you to be Word,
 why won't it conjugate you, why won't it distribute you,
 why from the garden wall are bougainvillaea
 not jumping with your meanings
 and in gazes of mercury does the sun not reverberate
 with news of you,
 nor are boxes opened
 with your music
 and its clear purpose.
 Why, why, My love,
 are you an illegible map,
 an arrow without a target,
 a gift absorbed in its intact wrappings,
 indivisible word that is born and dies in me.)

Why, this poem seems to be asking, is language unable to convert the desired object into an interpretable sign? In the final rhetorical question posed here the object of desire frustrates all attempts at “legibility,” while the subject’s attempted linguistic manipulation of reality is identified with a state of narcissistic self-absorption: “palabra indivisible que nace y muere en mí.” On a closer reading, however, a more subtle question emerges: why does my flesh not even *desire* to recreate a linguistic simulacrum of the beloved object? Why, in other words, is the usual sort of linguistic mediation rejected in favor of a deliberately opaque, almost private language? One possible answer—if it is permissible to respond to such rhetorical questions—is that this sort of linguistic transformation of the object of desire, often figured as the (male) poet writing directly onto a woman’s body, would no longer be “desirable,” even if it were possible. In other words, the idea of gaining access to the beloved through a poetic simulacrum—long a staple of lyric poetry—no longer seems viable. Yet the rhetoric of this poem suggests that the simple rejection of this attempt is

utterly unsatisfactory: the speaker is reduced to asking herself, in plaintive tones, why this lyric convention no longer functions as it should. The failure of the topos of “the word made flesh” leaves her even more self-absorbed than a more conventional lyric speaker might be.

Other poems in *Punto umbrío* also offer implicit critiques of poetic conventions. Often these poems sounds like self-reproaches; that is, they appear to be directed against the characteristic habits of thought of the speaker herself. “Hay sueños que no mueren,” one of the most striking poems in the book, pillories the lyrical pretension toward recreating an eternal present:

Hay sueños que no mueren, se empeñan
 en ser sueños.
 Ajenos a la comba de la esfera
 y a las operaciones de los astros
 trazan su propia órbita inmutable,
 y en blindadas crisálidas, se protegen
 del orden temporal.
 Por eso es que perduran,
 porque eligen no ser.
 Negándose se afirman,
 rehusando se mantienen, como flores de cuarzo
 indestructibles, puros, sin dejarse arrancar
 de su durmiente ínsula.
 Intactos en el tiempo,
 son inmunes a la devastación
 que a cada vuelta acecha, inhumana,
 a la pasión que exige y que devora,
 a la desobediencia y extravío
 que en los vagabundeos centellean.
 Monedas que el avaro recuenta sigiloso
 nunca salen del fondo del bolsillo.
 No ambicionan. No arriesgan. No conquistan.
 No pagarán el precio del fracaso,
 la experiencia, la determinación,
 la ebriedad o el placer.
 Sólo son impecables subterfugios. (62)

(There are dreams that do not die, they insist
 on being dreams.

Alien to the dome of the sphere
 and to the operations of the stars
 they trace their own immutable orbit,
 and in armored chrysalises, protect themselves
 from the temporal order.
 That is why they last,
 because they choose not to be.

Denying themselves they affirm themselves,
renouncing they maintain themselves, like flowers of quartz
indestructible, pure, without letting themselves be torn
from their sleeping island.
Intact in time,
they are immune from the devastation
that lies in wait around every corner, inhuman,
to the passion that demands and devours,
to the disobedience and extravagance
that glitter in wanderings.
Coins that the miser secretly counts
never emerge from the bottom of the pocket.
They do not aspire. They do not risk. They do not conquer.
They will not pay the price of failure,
experience, determination,
drunkenness or pleasure.
They are but impeccable subterfuges.)

This poem could be a warning against a particular variety of literary “autonomy” or “purity”: the achievement of an indestructible poetic “ínsula” has only negative implications. Standing apart from temporality, dreams create their own sterile reality. The striking images of the poem evoke a set of negative attitudes ranging from sterile solipsistic autonomy to self-abnegation, cowardice, isolation, and avarice. The sort of desires nurtured in such lyric conventions remain alive, paradoxically, because they are fixed in a state of suspended animation. Rossetti’s rejection of the sterility of unacted dreams comes quite close to William Blake’s insights in his “Proverbs of Hell”: “Expect poison from the standing water” (9). “Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires” (10). Lorca’s perspective of the infinite deferral of desire in works like *Así que pasen cinco años* is also relevant in this context.

The immediate Spanish tradition offers several other instructive parallels to Rossetti’s rejection of narcissistic desire. Claudio Rodríguez’s “Nieve en la noche” also condemns an inert desire that refuses to take risks:

Tan sin dolor, su entrega
es crueldad. Cae, cae
hostil al canto, lenta,
bien domada, bien dócil,
como sujeta a riendas
que nunca se aventuran
a conquistar. (159)

(So without pain, its surrender
is cruelty. It falls, it falls
hostile to song, slow,
well broken, well tame,

as though subject to reins
that never adventure
to conquest.)

The following poem from Pedro Salinas's *Largo lamento* appears to express an opposing perspective:

No rechaces los sueños por ser sueños.
Todos los sueños pueden
ser realidad, si el sueño no se acaba.
La realidad es un sueño. Si soñamos
que la piedra es piedra, eso es la piedra.
Lo que corre en los ríos no es un agua,
es un soñar, el agua, cristalino.
La realidad disfraza
su propio sueño, y dice:
"Yo soy el sol, los cielos, el amor."
Pero nunca se va, nunca se pasa,
si fingimos creer que es más que un sueño.
Y vivimos soñándola. Soñar
es el modo que el alma
tiene para que nunca se le escape
lo que se escaparía si dejamos
de soñar que es verdad lo que no existe.
Solo muere
un amor que ha dejado de soñarse
hecho materia y que se busca en tierra. (603)

(Do not reject dreams just because they are dreams.
All dreams can become
reality, if the dream never ends.
Reality is a dream. If we dream
that stone is stone, that is stone.
What runs in the rivers is not water,
it is a crystalline dream of the water.
Reality disguises
its own dream, and says
"I am the sun, the heavens, love."
But it never leaves, it never passes by,
if we pretend to believe that it is more than a dream.
And we live dreaming it. Dreaming
is the way that the soul
finds to not let escape
what would escape if we stopped
dreaming that what exists is not true.
Only a love that is no longer dreamt
will die
transformed into material and searched for on the earth.)

In Salinas's poem, the world of dreams assumes the form of a "virtual reality" in which no possibility is foreclosed upon. Yet it is in seeking their fulfillment on the earth that these dreams of love meet their death. The solution, then, is to preserve desire in a state of suspended animation. This is precisely the solution *rejected* in Rossetti's poem. Where Salinas's dreams are creative, Rossetti's are sterile and avaricious. In the context of Salinas's love poetry, "No rechaces los sueños por ser sueños" can be read as an elegy for a desire that is already irrecoverably lost.⁷ Its affirmation of the validity of an autonomous dream world, then, becomes a transparently defensive strategy, an effort to avoid accepting a loss that has already occurred.

In the final poem of *Punto umbrío* the speaker surrenders to desire, putting an end to perpetual deferral. This is the logical conclusion to the sequence, since the end of linguistic deferral also brings to an end the metapoetic play with the conventions of lyric poetry:

Como si una linterna me arrancara
de en medio de la noche,
así me descubriste, así me señalaste.
Así horadaste mis silencios escarpados y troquelaste
las fronteras de mi isla.
Nombrándome me expones, me situas en el ojo de la
diana.
No hay lugar para el ardid, no hay escondite.
Soy blanco paralizado, centro de tu voluntad, destino
de tu atención y tu advertencia.
¿A qué esperas?
No rehúyo la luz.
Hágase en mí lo que tu dardo indica. (65)

(As though a lantern were rooting me out
from the middle of the night,
so you uncovered me, so you pointed me out.
So you drilled through my steep silences and stamped out
the edges of my island.
Naming me you expose me, you situate me in the bull's-eye.
There is no place for a ruse, there is no place to hide.
I am paralyzed target, center of your will, destiny
of your attention and your warning.
What are you waiting for?
I won't shrink from the light.
Let what your dart ordains be done in me.)

By renouncing deferral, the speaker of this final poem also appears to surrender her own subjective autonomy. Desire thus attains a paradoxical status, since it is simultaneously what the subject wants and does not want: while desire springs from the subject's own urges, the surrender to desire is perceived as a

weakening of will. To submit to desire is at once a form of slavery and of freedom, the expression of one's own will and the enslavement to a force outside of one's control. As Luis Cernuda writes in *Los placeres prohibidos*: "Libertad no quiero sino la libertad de ser preso en alguien" (I want no freedom but the freedom to be the prisoner in someone).

This paradox, in which freedom and compulsion, autonomy and dependence, appear to exchange places, holds the key to the speaker's ambivalence throughout *Punto umbrío*. This ambivalence (like the equally ambivalent treatment of the conventions of lyric poetry) lends itself to a deconstructive mode of analysis, in which opposing terms are shown to be radically interdependent.⁸ Although these "deconstructive" turns might appear to distance Rossetti from the lyric tradition, the opposite is closer to the truth. To view poetic language as a continual deferral of desire, a deferral that the subject simultaneously elaborates and destroys through language, is simply to insert Rossetti's sequence within the time-worn topoi of the Western lyric tradition.

The question of what Rossetti brings to this tradition, then, seems inescapable. Like Petrarch, Rossetti could be said to be an original poet working primarily with inherited material. In Rossetti's case, however, this material is itself derived from the Petrarchan tradition. One tempting answer would be to claim that Rossetti subverts the occidental tradition through her deconstructive play with language. The obvious objection, however, is that this tradition is itself already deconstructive in a linguistically self-conscious way. Metapoetry in the 1990s, after a full century of linguistic self-consciousness, is surely no novelty; what is more, Rossetti's "subversion" of lyric conventions in this book, while intriguing, is relatively tame, a subtle rather than violent reversal of generic expectations.

Another, possibly more promising approach would be to emphasize the stylistic flair with which she rewrites these conventions. What is most striking about Rossetti's *Punto umbrío* is its exuberant and intense expressionism. Reading Rossetti, we suddenly realize (if we have not realized it before) that many late modernist and neo-avant-projects in contemporary Spanish poetry are marked by a certain refusal of pleasure. Valente's minimalism, Brines's sober *pudor*, and Panero's schizophrenic Mallarméan ascesis come to mind. On the other hand, attempts to break from this puritanism have not been wholly successful; Antonio Colinas's self-consciously "beautiful" aesthetic effects are often in doubtful taste. The contemporary suspicion of "beauty," a logical development of Kantian disinterestedness, finds expression in Adorno's rejection of *hedone*:

The precondition for the autonomy of artistic experience is the abandonment of the attitude of tasting and savouring. The trajectory leading to aesthetic autonomy passes through the stage of disinterestedness; and well it should, for it was during this stage that art emancipated itself from cuisine and pornography,

an emancipation that has become irrevocable. However, art does not come to rest in disinterestedness. It moves on. And in so doing it reproduces, in different form, the interest inherent in disinterestedness. In a false world all *hedone* is false. This goes for artistic pleasure, too. Art renounces happiness for the sake of happiness, thus enabling desire to survive in art. (Adorno 18)

It would be hard to find a theoretical statement more sharply at odds with Rossetti's sensibility. Instead of divorcing art from pornography, or sublimating desire through asceticism, she makes full use of her poetic powers in order to re-establish the connection between art and pleasure. As in her earlier work, one key source of Rossetti's appeal in *Punto umbrío* is the lushness and sensuality of her poetic language, with its alliterations, branching polysyndetons, and expansive metaphors. What is added in these later poems, nevertheless, is a more subtle interplay of surface and depth, as the beauty of the poet's language arouses, defers, and fulfills readerly desires.

Notes

- 1 This narrow response stems, in part, from the disproportionate amount of attention devoted to "Chico Wrangler" and "Calvin Klein, underdrawers." Until very recently, most of the articles published on Rossetti limited themselves to these two texts (Makris, Rosas and Cramsie, Servodidio, Ferradans, Ugalde, Wilcox 289–90). Debicki summarizes some potential responses to Rossetti's poetry as follows: "We might note that this text ["Chico Wrangler"], and others like it, leave much to the reader, whose response to the speaker can take several forms—the amused smile of the feminist, the surprised discovery of some traditional readers, even the irritation of the sexist male" (213). Debicki's valid point about the text's openness is undercut by his possibly overconfident predictions of how particular groups of readers will respond: some feminists might respond with irritation to the text and some sexist males (e.g. Buenaventura) will be titillated.
- 2 Martha LaPolette Miller's two articles on this book offer a useful perspective that does not overtly contradict my own reading of *Punto umbrío*.
- 3 Some readers will conclude that Rossetti's latest work is more "mature" or "profound" than her earlier work. I believe, however, that an emphasis on language as mediation would also enrich the reading of books such as *Devocionario*.
- 4 Wilcox expresses a view shared by many critics: "In 'Calvin Klein,' Rossetti makes the female power of seduction paramount, as she undermines traditional views of gender and foregrounds a woman's desire" (290). This reversal of expectations perhaps recedes in importance after the initial shock value has worn off. Thus it seems less significant to me now than when I first encountered this argument about Rossetti's poetry several years ago. In the age of Madonna, it is difficult to be shocked by anything Rossetti has written.
- 5 *Punto umbrío* bears an epigraph from book 10 of Augustine's *Confessions*: "He hecho de mí un enigma a vuestros ojos. Ésta es mi trágica dolencia" (7). See Bermúdez for an Augustinian reading of *Punto umbrío* that complements my approach.
- 6 See Freccero for a now-classic discussion of temporality in Petrarch's *Rime sparse*.
- 7 This elegiac tone is more explicit *Razón de amor* and *Largo lamento*, but it is already latent in many poem from *La voz a ti debida*.
- 8 Compare Eve Sedgwick's analysis of contemporary discourses surrounding addiction:

“so long as ‘free will’ has been hypostasized and charged with ethical value, for just so long has an equally hypostasized ‘compulsion’ had to be available as a counterstructure always internal to it, always requiring to be ejected from it” (133–34). This view of desire, analogous to that found in Rossetti’s work though quoted here out of context, is characteristically “deconstructive” both in its curious logic and its tortured syntax.

CHAPTER NINE

Concha García: The End of Epiphany

Left out at the last minute of Ramón Buenaventura's *Las diosas blancas*, the controversial anthology that helped to foster the so-called "boom" in women's poetry in the 1980s, Concha García has gained recognition more gradually than some of her more celebrated contemporaries. Her poetry, which can seem off-putting, tedious, or even grotesque on occasions, offers neither immediate sensory gratification nor the expectation of a transcendent epiphany. Despite these seemingly "unattractive" qualities, her work has gained a small but significant following. She has published nine books of poetry since the late 1980s and been included in several anthologies. Concha García's work can be divided into two main stages. After an early book, *Por mí no arderán los quicios ni se quemarán las teas*, she published a cycle usually described as a trilogy: *Otra ley* (1987), *Ya nada es rito* (1988), and *Desdén* (1990).¹ The second phase would begin with *Pormenor* (1993) and extend toward her most recent book (as of this writing), *Lo de ella* (2003). (She is also the author of a 2001 novel entitled *Miamor.com.*) García is a prolific writer whose poetry continues to develop, but at this point her work is substantial enough to merit more serious attention than it has received thus far.

Criticism of García's poetry can be found in the introductions to *Cuántas llaves* and *Árboles que ya florecerán*, by Manuel Vásquez Montalbán and Olvido García Valdés, respectively. Aside from a few other scattered critical articles, however, most of the reception of her work has been in the form of book reviews. This is not an unusual situation: very few Spanish poets of the past twenty years have received their critical due. A few, like Blanca Andreu and Ana Rossetti, have been more fortunate, although criticism on Rossetti, as we have seen, often centers on the most superficial and ostentatious dimension of her work. At this point there is not even a clear consensus about the most significant voices to emerge in this period, since even the "dominant tendency" (the "poetry of experience") is still extremely controversial. While the vitality of women's poetry has been cause for justifiable optimism, there is, at this point at least, no single figure who commands universal respect. Given this uncertain state of affairs, it would

be arbitrary to complain that Concha García—or any other single poet for that matter—has been neglected by the critics. The truth is that criticism almost always lags far behind creation. This chapter, then, is a belated effort to bring to light one of several contemporary Spanish poets deserving of wider notice.

García's early work consists mainly of sequences of short, linguistically ambiguous poems, characterized by a slightly self-absorbed eroticism. The stuttering syntax and somewhat eccentric vocabulary of these poems create an intense, almost claustrophobic reading experience. Although linguistically dense, these poems attempt to avoid *resonance*. The poem entitled "Del abandono," from *Desdén*, for example, explicitly turns its back on a certain ideal of sonority:

Ciertos nombres son sonoros, riman
con sus vocales repetidas y hacen
un diptongo gracioso en el final
de la sílaba. Otros se tienen
que deletrear letra por letra
parte de un todo que sin el desdén
ni se recordaría. (*Desdén* 40)

(Certain names are sonorous, they rhyme
with their repeated vowels and make
a graceful diphthong at the end
of the syllable. Others need to be
spelled out letter by letter
a part of a whole that without disdain
would not even be remembered.)

The sonorous, rhyming names contrast with those that do not roll off the tongue so easily. It is clear that the poet is more interested in exploring this more halting, less fluent speech than in perpetuating a more conventional poetic rhetoric.

Olvido García Valdés argues, convincingly to my mind, that there is a shift in the 1993 collection *Pormenor* toward a different sort of address to the reader: from the interior *oyente* of the earlier books to a more public reader: "... abriendo en el poema una vía hacia la reflexión parecía conllevar una nueva figura de *oyente* en su escritura, como si el largo discurso quebrado e intransitivo diera ahora paso a una necesidad de diálogo, o al menos de escucha, que conformara una nueva entonación del poema" (... opening in the poem a route toward reflection seemed to bring about a new figure of the *listener*, as if a long, broken intransitive discourse were giving way to the necessity for dialogue, or at least for listening, which might give shape to a new intonation in the poem) (*Árboles que ya florecerán* 11; original emphasis). In this second phase of García's work, individual poems tend to be longer and somewhat less cryptic. As the

poet herself states: “A partir de *Ayer y calles* me interesó cultivar un lenguaje más descriptivo, incluso con algunos momentos de narratividad” (Beginning with *Ayer y calles* I became interested in cultivating a more descriptive language, even with some moments of narrativity) (Benegas, *Ellas tienen la palabra* 244). It is in these later books that García offers a clear alternative to the “poetry of experience,” investigating the tedium of everyday life but deliberately refusing to sentimentalize or poetically redeem it.

As we have seen in Part One of this book, one of the dominant modes of recent Spanish poetry is a kind of “realism” derived from the “poesía cotidiana” of the 1950s. Poets and critics have spoken of a “new sentimentality,” a poetry of everyday life, a “poetry of experience,” or a “poetry for normal people.” (In recent years this interest in the everyday has taken on a different coloration: a “dirty” realism influenced by American writers like Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver.) Superficially, at least, Concha García participates in this general move toward poetic realism. Her poetry often focuses in on “nimiedades,” trivial, tedious, or disgusting details of everyday life. It is not, however, sensationalistic in the manner of the “dirty realist” Roger Wolfe. By the same token, it marks its distance significantly from the “poetry of experience” of the 1980s by rejecting the overt sentimentality of this school. In fact, I read her poetry as an explicit rejection of, and alternative to, the sentimentalization of everyday life as practiced by Luis García Montero.

In the poetics developed by García Montero, everyday life is to be the source of edifying, transcendent insight; banality is to be poetically redeemed for the benefit of “normal” citizens who see their own inner lives validated in a “complicitous” act of reading. As seen in Chapter 1, García Montero rejects the model which places the poet in a privileged status as bearer of absolute truths. At the same time, his poetry does not flee from the transcendent either. Admirers and detractors alike agree that he specializes in the deliberately subdued or understated epiphany, designed to produce a small shock of recognition in the reader. This redefinition of the modernist category of the “epiphany”—from the transcendent intuition of the artistic genius to the ordinary insight of the average person—serves to comply with the romantic expectations of the lyric genre: the reader expects the poem to culminate in a moment of transcendent revelation. These expectations are also thwarted to some extent, since the revelation, like the experience from which it arises, ends up being a relatively commonplace one, in contrast to the Joycean model of the epiphany as put forward in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In fact, the desire for universality (or “normality”) depends on the expectation that the reader will recognize that these events are utterly commonplace, that they might just as well have happened to him (or to her, although a male reader is perhaps more likely to feel this sort of identification with García Montero’s subject position). García Montero thus takes a

concept associated with High Modernism, the Joycean epiphany, and adapts it to the needs of his less ambitious literary project.

The conclusion to García Montero's "Mujeres," from *Habitaciones separadas*, illustrates this forced marriage of quotidian reality and conventional literariness. After a series of more general observations of women riding a bus, the speaker of the poem turns his attention to the woman who appears to be riding with him:

Yo me bajo en la próxima, murmuras.
 Me conmueve el recuerdo
 de tu piel blanca y triste
 y la hermandad humilde de tu noche,
 la mano que dejaste
 olvidada en mi mano,
 al venir de la ducha,
 hace sólo un momento,
 mientras yo me negaba a levantarme.

Que tengas un buen día,
 que la suerte te busque
 en tu casa pequeña y ordenada,
 que la vida te trate dignamente. (*Habitaciones separadas* 54–55)

(I'm getting off at the next stop, you murmur.
 I am moved by the memory
 of your sad and white flesh
 and the humble companionship of your night,
 the hand that you left
 forgotten in my hand
 as you came from the shower
 just a moment ago,
 while I refused to get up.

May you have a good day,
 may good fortune find you
 in your small, clean house,
 may life treat you with dignity.)

García Montero dresses up a perfectly ordinary scene in literary garb, narrating everyday events in mellifluous verse. (He introduces a few hendecasyllabic lines to vary the basic heptasyllabic rhythm.) The poem concludes with some noble-sounding but ultimately rather weak sentiments. After all, don't we all want life to be fair and dignified for one and all? Don't we all wish one another to "have a good day," whether at the grocery store or the dry cleaner? Is this an appropriate way for saying farewell to the woman who has shared his bed for the night? If the speaker of the poem is so touched by the memory of this experience, why are his pious desires expressed so tepidly? The *sentimentality* of

the approach, in my estimation, results from the strained attempt to derive a more transcendent meaning from an ordinary event, to ennoble his experience in a way that does not feel wholly justified. (This attempt also answers to the definition of *bathos*.) There is a disjunction, in other words, between the banality of the speaker's experience and his desire to reach a more elevated plane. García Montero follows the conventions of lyric poetry by leading up gradually to the emotional climax of the poem, but the promised epiphany is ultimately anticlimactic—although perhaps it will satisfy some readers.²

Concha García's approach to the poetics of everyday life, in contrast, presents the banality of everyday life without attempting to sentimentalize or redeem it. Banal reality remains what it is, offering little if any possibility for poetic redemption. While such an approach frustrates the expectations of the lyric genre, it offers an intense and intellectually challenging engagement with reality. We might contrast Luis García Montero's poem about observing women on the bus with Concha García's observation of a man also riding a bus in the poem "Otra":

Me gustaría ser el hombre
de fino bigote que toma el autobús,
no tiene heladas las manos.
Un hombre de estatura media
al que no le espera el bar
un hombre que charla
con un conductor de autobús
y le dice: *ya he terminado*
por hoy se acabó. Alguien
que sienta que por hoy se acabó
no tener manos heladas.
He acabado, le dice al conductor.
Tiene en los labios un deje de ilusión
es como si le esperase en alguna parte
otra cosa, no sé definir qué
clase de cosa puede ser
la que haga que alguien
de estatura mediana y con bigote
diga: *he acabado*. Me pregunto
qué clase de sensación
debe ser esa. Que haya acabado
y que probablemente haya acabado.
No sé qué puede haber acabado
se le nota en el habla. (*Ayer y calles* 54; emphasis in original)

(I'd like to be the man
with the thin mustache who takes the bus,
his hands aren't frozen.

A man of medium height
 who isn't headed for the bar
 a man who chats
 with the bus driver
 and tells him: *I've finished*
for today it's done. Someone
 who feels that for today it's done
 and not to have frozen hands.
I've done it, he tells the driver.
 In his lips there is a hint of illusion.
 It's as though something else
 were awaiting him
 somewhere, I can't define what it is
 which could make someone
 of medium height and mustache
 say, *I'm done.* I wonder
 what type of sensation that might be. That he's done
 and that probably he's done.
 I don't know what he could have done
 it's obvious in the way he says it.)

The complexity of this poem results from the disjunction between the apparent self-sufficiency of the mustachioed man and the mordant perspective of the observer, who claims not to understand what it is that this man might have accomplished. In his own eyes, at least, the man has finished some significant task, has finished his work, at least for the day. (The context leads us to believe that this accomplishment is a relatively mundane one.) The man, described only by his average height and thin metonymic mustache, seems average in every way, and his relatively banal phrase does not even suggest that he has done something out of the ordinary. Yet his complacency strikes a nerve in the female speaker, who is so far removed from any sense of accomplishment that she cannot imagine what the man might have done to justify such a phrase. Her distance from the man is expressed in the form of a desire to *be* him. Is this a form of envy then? Does she wish that she, too, had done a good day's work that would merit a feeling of such easy satisfaction? Absolutely not. It is impossible to take this expression of desire at face value, given her increasing harshness and incredulity of tone. She rephrases the same question—what could he have possibly done?—in different ways until the poem arrives at an inconclusive conclusion. She remains fundamentally “otra,” alien to the masculine self-sufficiency of the ordinary citizen on the bus. Actually, however, this sense of complacency is itself totally undermined by the insistent repetition of the verb *acabar*, which by the end of the poem has come to mean the opposite: not to have accomplished some important task, but to be *finished*, destroyed, done for.

The poem “Aburrimiento” [Boredom], from *Pormenor*, expresses a similarly paradoxical desire:

He deseado no desear nada, o desear
 pocas cosas, pocas reflexiones al unísono
 pocas elucubraciones contradictorias, pocos
 bares en mi camino, poco amor,
 poco de todo que todo cansa y no
 es que canse porque sea cansado el todo,
 sino que cuando te quedas sin nada
 añoras todo y eso es lo que realmente
 cansa. (*Pormenor* 63)

(I have desired to desire nothing, or desire
 few things, few reflections in unison
 few contradictory lucubrations, few
 bars in my path, little love,
 little of everything that tires and it isn't
 that it tires because everything is tiring,
 but rather that when you end up with nothing
 you long for everything and that is what really
 tires.)

In both this poem and “Otra” the repetition of key words does not produce resonance but rather a sense of tedium and even confusion. García’s style, in fact, aims to produce the opposite effect from that usually sought after in lyric poetry: the crescendo building up to the climactic, sonorous moment of truth. Here, the repetition of words like *pocos* and *cansa* leads us to believe that the speaker is trapped within the patterns of her own depression, and is unable to see a way out. There is no effort to find a more satisfying expression of this state of mind; the anticlimactic syntax mirrors the state of mind rather than transcending it.

This deliberate use of anticlimax is a risky strategy, since it can create the misleading impression that García’s poetry is written in a flat or uninteresting style. A reader who concluded that she was attempting (but ultimately failing) to create climactic epiphanies would be missing the deliberate attempt to achieve an effect of non-transcendence through the complete reversal of a certain dramatic structure associated with the lyric poem. In a sense, the notion of transgressing literary conventions has become a critical cliché: when was the last time a critic argued that a particular writer’s value lies in scrupulously obeying generic expectations? If one reads a great amount of contemporary lyric poetry, however, one quickly realizes that quite a few poets have little interest in flouting readerly expectations: a resolutely “poetic” tone and an elevated register remains the implicit norm, despite the historical impact of avant-garde practices over the past century. I would argue, then, that the frustration of these norms is still a meaningful gesture.

Evocations of boredom, fatigue, or tedium are frequent in García's poetry. At times, however, she intensifies these sensations by evoking outright disgust and revulsion. In "El tiempo sí regresa," the speaker confronts an unpleasant experience without attempting to lessen its impact:

Una cacerola que dejé puesta un día
sobre el mármol de la cocina.
Aquel lugar deshabitado largos años
mantuvo el utensilio. Ya era otra
al volver a destaparla. Vi moho
vi roña, vi partículas muy confusas
nadando en el agua pestilente. Vi
la forma de la cacerola intacta.
Recorrí con la mirada cansina
los alrededores del lugar, y el tiempo
se volcó sobre mí: el mismo edificio,
la misma calle, las mismas acacias.
El hedor de la cacerola era tan intenso
que me aparté a la ventana
para respirar. Mirando la calle
vi la misma gente, las mismas
posturas de la gente, las mismas
conversaciones de la gente. Lo vi
todo igual. Vacíé aquel hediondo
líquido y restregué la porcelana
con un viejo estropajo que se deshizo
entre mis dedos. (*Ayer y calles* 62)

(A saucepan I left one day
on the marble of the kitchen.
That uninhabited place kept the utensil
many years. I was another woman
when I returned to lift the lid. I saw mold
I saw filth, I saw very confused particles
swimming in the pestilent water. I saw
the shape of the pan intact.
I scanned with tired gaze
the surroundings of the place, and time
capsized around me: the same building,
the same street, the same acacias.
The stench of the pan was so strong
I turned to the window
to breathe. Looking at the street
I saw the same people, the same
postures of the people, the same
conversations of the people. I saw
everything the same. I emptied that reeking

liquid and scrubbed the porcelain
with a scouring pad that came apart
in my hands.)

The poem is quite transparently allegorical. The saucepan, in the woman's traditionally domestic sphere, represents some unfinished business, some festering psychic wound. The poem enacts an effort to "clean up the mess," to come to terms with this past problem, with which the speaker still feels with a sense of great immediacy, despite the many years that have passed. The atmosphere is eerily dreamlike, but, for a dream, unusually vivid.

The poem's evocation of disgust is quite powerful, as is the refusal to see the past through the gauzy lens of nostalgia or sentimentality. García's vision of the past, in fact, is pointedly anti-nostalgic. Nostalgia might be defined as the impulse to idealize the past by filtering out unpleasant memories and smoothing away rough edges. The human memory is notoriously selective, and even very unpleasant memories can lose their harshness over time. Although the speaker of "El tiempo sí regresa" is "another" when she returns to the kitchen to clean the pan, her surroundings are identical to those of the original scene of the trauma, as though time had not passed at all. The insistence on the identical surroundings and the alienation of the speaker creates a sense of the uncanny. The poem ends with an attempt to resolve the original problem by scrubbing the pan with a scouring pad that dissolves in the speaker's fingers.

Concha García does, then, make some effort to derive a larger meaning from her experience, but this effort is free of sentimentality, contrasting with the typical lyric gesture of Luis García Montero: "me conmueve el recuerdo." What is at stake in the contrast between these two approaches to the poetic exploration of "experience"? García Montero places experience in the category of what is "already known," whereas Concha García, like José Ángel Valente, explicitly rejects this sort of "pre-packaging." García Montero always seems to be reinforcing the reader's preconceived ideas and prejudices, striving for a "verisimilitude" based principally on conformity to cultural clichés.

It is true that the "minor epiphanic mode" enjoys a certain popularity, and may even represent a democratization of the elitist model derived from modernism. Large numbers of readers will doubtless feel comfortable with this now familiar pattern. Indeed, its very familiarity eases the process of identification between the reader and the speaker of the poem, which often goes by the code-word "complicidad" (complicity). Manuel Vásquez Montalbán speaks of Concha García's explicit refusal to offer this brand of readerly participation: "la voluntad expresa de oponerse a cualquier posibilidad de viscosa confesionalidad que atraiga las emociones cómplices del lector" (the express will to oppose any possibility of viscous confessionality that will attract the complicitous emotions of the reader) (7). Vásquez Montalbán does not mean to say that "the

reader” (whoever this critical fiction might be!) will never feel a sense of identification with the implied speaker of the poem, but rather that this identification cannot be based on a facile evocation of the familiar. Indeed, the moment of epiphany, in which the reader is supposed to identify with the poet’s insight into reality, depends on a particularly passive view of the act of reading.

What value is there, then, in thwarting the reader’s desire for a satisfying moment of poetic transcendence? Despite her rejection of the easy “epiphany,” her refusal to draw easy lessons from her experience, it could be argued that Concha García’s approach is ultimately more satisfying than the seemingly more “reader-friendly” option offered by the “poetry of experience.” The deliberate avoidance of any appeal to a sentimental vision of reality takes on even more value in a cultural climate in which even television commercials offer brief “heartwarming” vignettes.

I would argue that the value of García’s evocations of ennui and disgust is derived precisely from the prevalence of sentimental glorifications of everyday life. There may be, also, some value in creating alternative forms of readerly “complicity,” models that repel the complacent reader but attract identification with those who feel alienated from the dominant paradigms. The avoidance of easy identification may very well be a route to a more oblique form of identification, just as the end of epiphany might signal a more authentic poetic exploration of reality.

In view of Concha García’s incisive critique of the conventional patterns of lyric transcendence, it is not surprising that she maintains a certain distance from the literary culture of contemporary Spain, with its endless round of homages to past and present masters. The glorification of the national literary heritage is evident in the constant celebration of commemorative acts (*homenajes, centenarios*) and the somewhat overdetermined lionization of a few elder figures like the late José Hierro. A culture so devoted to prizes and homages leaves little room for actual critical debate: the same culture that awarded Hierro multiple prizes for the same work could hardly spare a word to examine the more innovative poetry of Concha García herself. (The modest Hierro himself often seemed bemused by the disproportionate degree of attention he was receiving.) There is nothing wrong with recognizing the lifetime achievement of an elder statesman, but the never-ending celebration of certain literary lions—at the expense of any critical discussion—rarely if ever leads to a deeper understanding of contemporary poetry in all its complexity and depth. The culture of literary lionization ultimately transforms poetry into a form of readily digestible kitsch. Needless to say, this particular cultural dynamic rarely benefits relatively unknown women writers like Concha García. Her attitude toward the dominant culture might be similar to that of the woman on the bus regarding with some suspicion the man “de estatura media y con bigote.”

Perhaps in order to escape from the overbearing presence of this particular form of literary nationalism, García has looked outside the borders of her language, identifying more closely with foreign poets:

Me gustaría puntualizar algo, la importancia que ha ejercido en mi poesía la lectura de poetas de otras lenguas. En la mayoría he tenido que recurrir a traducciones—qué importante la labor de quien traduce poesía—. La influencia de Celan, Stevens, Reich, Bachmann, Trakl, Milosz, Holan, Ajmatova, Moore, ... ha sido fundamental, sobre todo en estos últimos años. ¿Por qué? Porque me interesa la visión del mundo que cada uno de ellos y ellas me ha aportado, siempre con un lenguaje y una temática distintos a la tradición española. (244)

(I would like to insist on something, the importance that the reading of poets of other languages has had on my poetry. In most cases I have had to have recourse to translations—how important is the work of those who translate poetry. The influence of Celan, Stevens, Reich, Bachmann, Trakl, Milosz, Holan, Akhmatova, Moore, ... has been fundamental, above all in these last years. Why? Because I'm interested in the vision that each of them has brought me, always with a language and a thematics distinct from the Spanish tradition.)

It is easy to see why these mostly Central and East European writers might offer a challenging set of aesthetic problems to a poet in García's circumstances, just as an American poet of the same period might find an alternative to her own tradition in Lorca, Vallejo, or Lispector. García refuses to pay homage to twentieth-century Spanish masters, just as she marks her difference from the minor epiphanies celebrated by so many contemporary poets. In both cases, what she is rejecting is an attitude of uncritical sentimentality and nostalgia.

A poetics based on tedium and disgust does not, at first glance, appear a promising direction for contemporary Spanish poetry. I would argue, however, that this attitude is precisely what is needed in a literary climate that exalts banality without recognizing it as such. Concha García reverses the climactic logic of the conventional period style, with its prefabricated revelations, in order to restore poetry to its proper function: not to dress up ordinary reality in literary garb, but to explore the fundamentally alien nature of experience.

Notes

- 1 Another early book, *Diálogos de la Hetaira*, was finished in 1980 but did not appear until 2003. The earlier publication of the book was cancelled because it was considered "un tanto impúdico" (a little bit immodest). I have consulted all the books by Concha García listed in the bibliography with the exception of *Por mí no arderán los quicios*.
- 2 Claudio Rodríguez occasionally approaches a similar sort of sentimentality, but there is a clear difference: Rodríguez, the last great Romantic in Spanish poetry, imbues ordinary reality with a sense of the sacred, whereas García Montero seeks to "desacralize" poetry.

CHAPTER TEN

Lola Velasco's *El movimiento de las flores* and the Limits of Criticism

'A una lectura le pido movilidad, que cuando cierre el libro se haya producido un cambio, por mínimo que sea, en mi interior.'

(From my reading I ask for mobility, that when I close the book a change will have happened, as minimal as it might be, in my interior.)

—Lola Velasco (Benegas, *Ellas tienen la palabra* 287)

Lola Velasco's poetry offers the critic no immediate "hook," that is to say, no obvious point of departure for the elaboration of a critical argument.¹ Indeed, critics have been remarkably silent about her work. While Velasco's poetry is not incompatible with the "essentialist" tendency inspired by José Ángel Valente, it is free from obvious stylistic debts to Valente, or to any other contemporary Spanish poet for that matter. It appears to spring, in fact, from a desire to elude classifications, alignments, and ideological alibis of any kind. The epigraph to the 2003 work *El movimiento de las flores* is from twentieth-century poet and artist Henri Michaux, best known perhaps for his experiments with mescaline:

Soy de los que aman el movimiento, el movimiento que rompe la inercia, que emborrona las líneas, que deshace las alineaciones, me libera de construcciones. Movimiento como desobediencia, como remodelación. (17)

(I am one of those who love movement, that movement that breaks inertia, that blurs lines, that undoes affiliations, liberates me from constructions. Movement as a disobedience, as a reshaping.)

This refusal of affiliations, allegiances, and stable positions, of course, could also be seen as the ultimate rhetorical move in a certain poetic (or critical) game: a way of defining one's position while seeming to reject positionality itself. Indeed, nothing is more frequent in the critical discourse surrounding contemporary poetry than the claim that a given writer is one-of-a-kind or uniquely resistant to classification. Often the poets in question fit quite comfortably within existing trends (or are frankly derivative of better-known poets). Michaux's self-definition ("soy de los que...") is as a member of a group,

in implicit binary opposition to those who actually *do* prefer clear-cut lines of demarcation. By citing Michaux, Velasco also signals her paradoxical allegiance to this group defined by its resistance to “alineaciones.”

I am not prepared to resolve this classic *aporia*. Nor will I be able to avoid *using* Lola Velasco to put forward a critical argument of my own: that the subtlety of this poetry makes it resistant to strategies of reading that depend on an Archimedean point outside of the text for critical leverage. What makes Velasco's work particularly difficult to define is the way it continually blurs boundaries: between the literal and the figurative, the speaker and the addressee, even between constancy and variability. Despite this impulse to subvert poetic norms, however, this poetry also resists my efforts to read it as a deconstruction of Western metaphysics or a radical revision of the traditions of lyric poetry. It is not that theory has nothing to offer here, but that the lightness of tone—the “purity”—of Velasco's poetry seem out of proportion to any theoretical metalanguage. From one perspective, in fact, her poetry might appear tame or unthreatening, despite its intellectual depth and formal rigor. I would like to be able to argue, for example, that her poetry transgresses certain conventions of poetry by blurring the line between the literal and metaphorical planes, complicating the relations between the poetic speaker and addressee, and subjecting the reader to a constant flux of sensations. Returning to the poetry itself, however, I am struck once again by the inadequacy of this language to describe a poetry that seems so unpretentious, so insouciant about its own power to disturb customary patterns of thought.

Velasco tends to write extended sequences rather than individual lyric poems. Her first book, *La frente de la mujer oblicua*, consists of several shorter sequences, while *La cometa o las manos sobre el papel* is an extended poetic dialogue between the two characters named in the title. The more recent *Intravenus* is another sort of dialogue: a poetic sequence composed in collaboration with the poet Amalia Iglesias. (Yet another sequence, *El sueño de las piedras*, has not yet been published as of this writing.) Lola Velasco's poetry might seem rather ethereal or even insubstantial when read in anthologies or shorter selections. This impression disappears when the works are read as major long poems.

El movimiento de la flores is divided into seventy untitled sections of ten lines each. What gives *El movimiento de las flores* its overall unity is an extended metaphor: the movement of the flowers (named in the title) is equivalent to the poet's consciousness of the flux of time. This equivalence depends, in turn, on what Lakoff and Johnson view as one of the most basic structures of thought, the metaphor “people are plants” (6). This metaphor is nearly ubiquitous in human thought and in poetry, appearing in Shakespeare's Sonnet 15 (“When I consider everything that grows”) and countless other texts. This familiarity is conducive to the development of secondary metaphors, like blood = sap. In

Velasco's treatment, the natural world, complete with bees, water, and sunlight, merges with a specifically human consciousness of time and language. The metaphorical and the literal planes of discourse, then, exist in a fluid, almost undifferentiated continuum.

This uncertainty is also evident at the level of poetic discourse. The speaker of these poems adopts an innocent, almost naive attitude at times. But who is this speaker anyway? The answer is rarely unambiguous:

Aguantaremos trombas de agua.
Otra vez,
aquellas confianzas tan frágiles.
en el invernadero
de la noche.
Así se venció la música
de los rayos.
Se tendieron,
y parecían luces
que todo lo ven. (19)

(We will withstand cloudbursts.
Once again
those too-fragile secrets
in the greenhouse
of night.
That is the way the music of the lightning
was vanquished.
They lay down,
and seemed to be lights
seeing everything.)

This section seems to be spoken by the flowers themselves, and the attribution of this utterance to them helps to explain the childlike innocence of the tone. It is easy to picture them suffering through rainstorms and exchanging their fragile confidences in the greenhouse of night. It would be a mistake, however, to jump to the conclusion that the entire book has a consistently defined speaker: at times, the flowers are referred to in the third person, or are the most probable addressees. Neither the *yo* nor the *tú*, in fact, maintains a consistent identity from poem to poem. As Marta López-Luaces has pointed out, with great critical acumen, Velasco nearly always complicates the relation between the poetic speaker and her addressee:

En la poesía de Lola Velasco se transgrede la representación habitual el *tú* habitualmente pasivo del poema lírico, siempre a la espera de que un "yo," un sujeto activo, le imponga, le asigne, un significado. Velasco escribe desde una primera persona, desde un *yo* que no delimita, ni impone un significado al "otro" sino que reconstruye un *yo* que también es el "otro" y viceversa. De tal modo transforma,

por metonimia, el cuerpo amado en cuerpo poético, el cuerpo como nombre común al que se le pueden dar múltiples significados. ('Porque la tradición...')

In Lola Velasco's poetry there is a transgression of the representation of the habitually passive *you* of the lyric poem, which is always waiting for an "I," an active subject, to impose or assign a signified. Velasco writes from a first person, from an I, that does not limit or impose a signified on the "other" but rather reconstructs an I that is also an "other," and vice-versa. In this way she transforms, by metonymy, the beloved body into a poetic body, the body as a common noun that can be given multiple signifieds.

In a previous work, *La cometa o las manos sobre el papel*, Velasco writes a dialogue between two discrete speaking subjects, separated into clearly-labelled sections: "habla la cometa" and "hablan las manos." In *El movimiento de las flores*, by contrast, it is difficult to assign any utterance to any given speaker with any degree of certainty. This generalized ambiguity obviously complicates any possible interpretation of the text, since the reader cannot depend on his or her ability to assign utterances to a unified subject of enunciation.

This indeterminacy, nevertheless, provides a key to the interpretation of the work: taking a clue from the Michaux epigraph, we might conclude that the poet's aim is to avoid the *inertia* that comes from defining reality through a stable system of signs. In the following example, even the future, which normally would be seen as realm of radical uncertainty, becomes fossilized before the fact:

Hacia delante
ya se vislumbra
el esqueleto fosilizado
del futuro.
Cuando avanzo,
retrocedo.
En sus pétalos eternos,
el presente indomable.
Cada movimiento revela
un deseo de inercia. (29)

(Up ahead
I can already glimpse
the fossilized skeleton
of the future.
When I advance,
I fall backwards.
In their eternal petals,
the untameable present.
Each movement reveals
a desire for inertia.)

Inertia, of course, is not only the tendency of objects at rest to remain at rest, but also the tendency of moving objects to remain in motion. The conclusion of this poem, then, is ambiguous: does it speak of a desire to remain in motion, or to come to a stopping point?

There is a similar oscillation in the *tone* of this sequence, which alternates between an aphoristic, almost sententious desire to state abstract truths, and a more tentative, inconclusive tone. Many sections of *El movimiento de las flores* end with a definitive-sounding maxim: “Si nos separan, envejecemos” (If they separate us, we grow old) (21). “Y cuando estés a oscuras, / seré la curva / que desvíe la luz hacia ti” (And when you are in the darkness / I will be the curve / that deflects the light toward you) (47). “Perfecta, / ahora, / en su hexágono de miel” (Perfect, now, in its hexagon of honey) (76). These more conclusive endings serve to stop the movement of the poem in order to extract a meaning or a message, albeit temporarily. Even when their tone sounds quite assured, their interpretation is not necessarily automatic. Other sections end with enigmatic images that leave the reader somewhat suspended and thus further frustrate the desire for closure: “La incertidumbre / es un sonido / que no está entero” (Uncertainty is a sound that is not whole) (41). “El aliento del cazador / yacía en el círculo de agua” (The hunter’s breath lay in the circle of water) (61).

The binary opposition between movement and stasis in Velasco’s poetry entails an acute consciousness of poetry as an art form moving through time. While movement is seen to be preferable to stasis, yet the desire for order and regularity remains fairly strong. The rhythm of the sequence itself follows a fairly regular—although subtly varied—pattern. The ten-line stanzas tend to fall into three or four rhythmic phrases. The following example, for example, might be divided into three units:

[1] Volverá el crudo invierno,
la realidad
oculta
en su rotación de emociones.
[2] Tu corazón de abeja,
libre,
en su herida prodigiosa.
[3] Miraré hacia la ladera
del vuelo
y diré que estuve allí. (65)

([1] The harsh winter will return,
reality
hidden
in its rotation of emotions.
[2] Your bee’s heart,
free,

in its prodigious wound.
 [3] I will look toward the side
 of flight
 and say that I was there.)

Three sentences can be divided up among ten lines in variable combinations of lines: 4 3 3; 3 4 3; 3 3 4. etc. The verse form thus lends itself to seemingly infinite variability within the constant 10-line stanza. No two poems have the same rhythm, yet the three phrase structure repeats itself enough so that one feels a sense of rhythmic coherence in the structure as a whole.

In their thematic development, likewise, the individual sections of the sequence tend to present similar but never identical ideas. One could not go wrong emphasizing either the unity of the underlying concept or the variability of the individual treatments. To sum up the book in one or two sections might not do justice to this variability, yet this variability is ultimately finite. The rhythmic movement of the stanzas is, in fact, inseparable from this thematic variation, since the central poetic problem of *El movimiento de las flores* is the oscillation between movement and stasis. The flowers, rooted in a single location, never stop moving. The very idea of movement, of course, entails both a spatial and temporal dimension. Each individual poem (or stanza of the long poem) is another view of the flowers in this continual yet ever-changing relationship to space and time.

It is perhaps inevitable that this poetry will also comment on its own movement in metapoetic terms. The following poem, for example, speaks to the relationship between two dimensions of language, *writing* and *song*:

Escucha
 la música cuadrículada
 de los pulmones,
 palabras
 que se cruzan
 como líneas
 para apresar
 el canto
 incendiario
 de tu vuelo. (45)

(Listen
 to the squared music
 of the lungs,
 words
 crossing
 like lines
 to capture
 the incendiary
 song
 of your flight.)

The images of “música cuadrículada” and “líneas / que se cruzan” suggest graph paper (such as that found in student notebooks sold in Spain). The verbal music of words on the page attempts to capture another kind of song. The poem seems to contrast a more definable geometric pattern with the transcendent flight of an unspecified addressee: “el canto incendiario / de tu vuelo.” This contrast between rationality and transcendent music, however, is complicated by the suggestion that these squares are already musical. They are already vocalized as well, since they are the product of the writer’s lungs as well as of her pen. The complexity here does not arise from the use of unfamiliar comparisons but from the subtle deployment of familiar metaphors. *Song*, *fire*, and *flight*, for example, are all conventional metaphors for poetic inspiration; the concept of *capturing* (“apresar”), likewise, is normally associated with the effort to express the ineffable.

Another set of familiar metaphors underlies this metapoetic text:

El lenguaje construye tumbas
donde quedarse.
Hombro con hombro,
también tú y yo nos perderemos
en lo infinitamente pequeño.
No busques
la verdadera identidad de las cosas
en las palabras,
sino en los labios
que las pronuncian. (82)

(Language constructs tombs
in which to remain.
Shoulder to shoulder
you and I also will get lost
in the infinitely small.
Don’t seek
the true identity of things
in words
but in the lips
that pronounce them.)

This poem combines two related suspicions about language, both of them deeply rooted in the literary tradition: language is a way of monumentalizing or preserving human life, but by the same token it constrains and limits: a monument is also a tomb. The final sentence of the poem revisits the idea that language is inherently deceptive; its authenticity is to be found only in the presence of the speaking subject, as in Claudio Rodríguez’s “Voz sin pérdida”:

He oído y creído en muchas voces
aunque no en las palabras.

He creído en los labios
pero no en el beso. (285).

(I have heard and believed many voices
but not the words.
I have believed in lips
but not in the kiss.)

The subtle use of these relatively familiar metaphors makes Velasco's poetry simultaneously accessible, since the metaphors themselves belong to a common stock, and difficult, since their actual deployment quickly becomes quite complex. In fact, this combination of simplicity and complexity is at the core of her achievement as a poet. The characteristics that have emerged in this reading of *El movimiento de las flores* include the following:

- 1) A slippage between metaphorical and literal meaning.
- 2) A related indeterminacy in the identities of speaker and addressee; a fluid relation between the *yo* and the *tú*.
- 3) An oscillation between movement and stasis.
- 4) A *tone* that is alternately apodictic and uncertain.
- 5) A rhythmic pattern that is regular, yet continually varied.
- 6) An ambivalence toward language itself: language lends itself both to constant motility and to the stasis of fixed meanings.
- 7) A use of metaphors that are at once familiar and defamiliarized, resulting in a style that is both accessible and intellectually complex.

Almost any generalization that could be made about *El movimiento de las flores*, then, must be expressed in the form of a binary opposition. Not surprisingly, the unsigned introduction to the book also emphasizes such oppositions: "En *El movimiento de las flores* se reconocen lo universal y lo concreto, la sencillez y la profundidad, la física y la metafísica, lo fugaz y lo permanente. Porque en él se resume la contradicción de la vida" (In *The Movement of the Flowers* there is a recognition of the universal and the concrete, simplicity and complexity, the fleeting and the permanent) (12). Considered together, these features are all manifestations of a single poetic problem: the impossible urge to remain in constant motion, to avoid fixed patterns, while at the same time creating a long, cohesive poem.

These contradictions and tensions at the heart of Velasco's project make it difficult to classify her in the current literary climate. Her textual strategies do not seem as radical or transgressive as those of Henri Michaux or Concha García. She does not aspire, either, to the sort of hieratic authority and cultural prestige that Valente achieved in his later years. On the other hand, she is definitely at the opposite pole from the autobiographical tendencies of the "poetry of experience." As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, she

does not provide easy fodder for critical interpretation. Contemporary criticism favors projects that can be interpreted according to “hooks”: Leopoldo María Panero’s poetic madness, or Ana Rossetti’s ostentatious subversion of gender roles, for example, offer ready-made entries into critical discourse. Other poets become privileged objects of study by virtue of their exemplary status as leaders of particular tendencies. Velasco’s poetry, in contrast, has a sort of “purity” that makes it stubbornly resistant to readings driven by particular ideological agendas. There is probably no point in opposing such “instrumental” readings. The opposition to ideology is itself ideological, and critics who complain about the subordination of literary concerns to other questions have their own axe to grind. What is striking, nevertheless, is the muteness of criticism in the face of works that do not lend themselves to obvious *uses*.

I would like to argue that Lola Velasco deconstructs Western metaphysics, or employs *écriture féminine*, or brings to bear a specifically lesbian perspective on the act of poetic creation. I could imagine another critic making such arguments, but I feel I would be guilty of critical overreaching in doing so myself. While Velasco’s project is an aesthetically ambitious one, it is also eminently modest—unpretentious—in its claims for itself. Hence a heavy-handed critical approach would be *tactless*, placing the emphasis where it does not belong. Lola Velasco, in other words, is not the sort of poet about whom one would want to make inflated claims, since her poetry reclaims a space for itself by rejecting inflationary rhetoric.

What does the case of Lola Velasco tell us about the state of poetry at the beginning of the twenty-first century? For me, the lesson is that literary modernism, characterized by aesthetic ambition, formal rigor, and intellectual complexity, is still a viable mode for writing poetry, and can be accomplished with a sort of modesty and tact that deflates our preconceptions about the inherent pretentiousness of the High Modernist mode. Her work is more reminiscent of the great French avant-garde poet Pierre Reverdy than of the visionary mode of Rilke or the historical sweep of Neruda. It is perhaps in this more unassuming mode, perhaps, that modern poetry survives at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Note

- 1 I borrow this concept from Charles Bernstein’s similar remark about the poetry of Barbara Guest.

Afterword

This book has attempted to address the question of why the most ambitious and intellectually challenging poetry of our time meets with so much resistance or indifference. Posed in this way, however, the question virtually answers itself: avant-garde and late modernist poetry, almost by definition, resist an easy assimilation by the larger culture. As I have shown in the preceding chapters, recent Spanish poetry outside of the “dominant school” is not lacking in quality, variety, or depth. The poetry of Valente and Gamoneda remains a paragon of High Modernist literary values. Rossetti, García, and Velasco continue to write a kind of late-modernist or avant-garde poetry that challenges the reader. I believe subsequent literary histories will recognize that it is this poetry, not the neo-conservative “poetry of experience,” that “dominates” Spanish poetry in the final two decades of the century. The twilight of the avant-garde is a triumphant one.

It should also be pointed out that such poetry, the heritage of the great moderns of the first half of the twentieth century, has never enjoyed widespread popular appeal, even at its moment of greatest cultural prestige. Thus the notion that we are living in an age especially recalcitrant to poetry is at best an historically inaccurate simplification. What has changed, perhaps, is that university professors, and others belonging to the “élite” culture, no longer profess to believe in the modernist paradigm of a “high” culture worthy of respect and emulation. Even many highly educated people today seem to share the widespread disdain for more difficult forms of art. The waning of the modernist imperative at the end of the twentieth century has meant that the expression of indifference (or even hostility) to challenging and difficult forms of art no longer carries any negative stigma, even in academic circles. In the academic humanities, the move from literary to cultural studies has undermined the traditional privilege enjoyed by literary works deemed to be more prestigious or “high-brow.” It is true that such works continue to be studied—reports of the death of the canon have been exaggerated in the popular media—but many in the field have the sense that the study of literature is an essentially conservative enterprise left over from an earlier, less enlightened period.

This conception of literary study is, unfortunately, quite accurate in many cases. The defense of the “literary” *per se* does often seem to be the province of more conservative members of the academic profession, and in this context the promotion of a new field open to the study of all forms of cultural expression is quite welcome. When an elder statesman of my field starts to defend the primacy of the literary, I sympathize with him but wince at the same time: I cannot help feeling that, at some level, his “literature” is not mine. I remember the academy was never very adept at reflecting the vitality of modern and contemporary poetry: the New Criticism, for example, promoted a deeply conservative version of modernism, explicitly based on the most reactionary aspects of T. S. Eliot’s poetry and critical thought, and on a desire to resist social change in the Southern States, the most conservative region of the country. I remember, too, that Harold Bloom, also a champion of the Western canon and a purveyor of popular “greatest hits” anthologies, uses the term “school of resentment” to mark his own resentment toward feminism and gay and lesbian studies, and has almost no interest in the work of any significant younger poet in the United States. Prestigious deconstructive critics like J. Hillis Miller have professed their belief in the sanctity of the canon, turning their attention mostly to Romantic and Victorian poetry. Even a supposedly “avant-garde” movement in literary criticism like deconstruction, then, has had little to say about contemporary avant-garde poetry.

My own approach has been to follow a third path between a conservative “literary studies” and a “cultural studies” that shows very little interest in literature *per se*, as though literature were not, still, a significant part of “culture.” Cultural studies promises to democratize the study of literature and culture by placing cultural productions of various types on an equal footing. In practice, however, this almost always entails a devaluation of *élite* culture. Since the canon still survives in academic reading lists and in more traditional scholarship, it is innovative work by younger writers that tends to be overlooked. My “third way,” then, entails following the example of Marjorie Perloff and other critics who have studied more innovative contemporary literature within the academy, attempting to bridge the gap between scholars and poets.

One argument underlying this book is that the autonomy of poetry as an art form has a tangible value, and that the insistence on this value is not, as some would believe, an inherently conservative gesture. I believe that the lesson we have learned in the past few years is that, in the absence of some notion of autonomous value, literature will be evaluated either for its market price or for its political instrumentality. A significant work, in other words, will have either some economic value, judged by sales figures or box office receipts, or some wider social resonance. Often, these two scales of value exist in an uneasy relationship to each other: without some measure of popularity in the market-

place, a work can not really do the “cultural work” it is called upon to do. This means that if a poem is read by only a few people, it will inevitably be found lacking in social relevance, whatever its explicit political content might be. The unfortunate result is that, in the absence of a commitment to aesthetic values, market forces will tend to define the importance of a work of literature, even for critics with a political agenda.

The answer to the problem of the marginalization of poetry, according to some, is to bring something called “poetry” to the attention of a wider public via ambitious advertisement campaigns. Charles Bernstein, in a biting satire entitled “Against National Poetry Week as Such,” points out the inherent contradiction in such an effort. The main problem is that the effort is deeply insincere, since the product being offered to the public lacks all the qualities we associate with “poetry” in the first place:

The path taken by the Academy’s National Poetry Month, and by such foundations as Lannan and the Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Fund, have been misguided because these organizations have decided to promote not poetry but the idea of poetry, and the idea of poetry too often has meant almost no poetry at all. Time and time again we hear the official spokespersons tell us they want to support projects that give speedy and efficient access to poetry and that the biggest obstacle to this access is, indeed, poetry, which may not provide the kind of easy reading required by such mandates.

This is the genius of the new Literary Access programs: the more you dilute art, the more you appear to increase the access. But access to what? Not to anything that would give a reader or listener any strong sense that poetry matters, but rather access to a watered down version that lacks the cultural edge and the aesthetic sharpness of the best popular and mass culture. The only reason that poetry matters is that it has something different to offer, something slower on the uptake, maybe, but more intense for all that, and also something necessarily smaller in scale in terms of audience. Not better than mass culture but a crucial alternative to it.

Note that Bernstein’s disdain is not for popular or mass culture, which, he allows, can be smart and edgy in its own right, but for the seemingly well-intentioned middle-brow dilution of high culture. He strongly suggests that we should be suspicious of the impulse to “popularize” poetry in a way that would eliminate all those elements that make it distinctive and valuable.

The Spanish situation is not identical to that in North America to which Bernstein is referring. Official culture in Spain, heavily supported by the State, is devoted largely to the nostalgic commemoration of the cultural patrimony of an idealized past—an element lacking in the U.S. Nevertheless, there are some strong parallels between García Montero’s “poetry of experience” and contemporary American poetry of the Billy Collins school. Most significantly, both movements successfully position themselves at the center or mainstream of

the cultural landscape and reject more avant-garde, intellectually challenging poetics.

It is difficult to avoid the appearance of elitism when insisting that there is a significant difference between John Ashbery and Billy Collins, or between Antonio Gamoneda and Luis García Montero. Even if we accord Collins and García Montero their due, however, almost anyone would agree that their poetics is founded on an explicit rejection of the more challenging role that readers like Charles Bernstein or Jonathan Mayhew expect from poetry. The “anti-elitist” brief against difficult late modernist and postmodernist poetry fails, in my view, because it is based on a misguided defense of the popular. The objection Bernstein makes is not to popular taste per se, but to the relentless promotion of a sort of middle-brow culture of blandness, which often lacks the vitality of a truly “popular” culture.

Another familiar assumption that must be rebutted is that the assault on high culture is somehow “progressive.” It is true that conservative pundits inside and outside of academia sometimes use the idea of a traditional literary canon in order to promote a political agenda, but does anybody believe that the study of literature helps to prop up the power of the Bush administration, or that the promotion of cultural studies will undermine its power? If ever the political élite required the sort of cultural legitimization provided by erudite literary scholars, those days are long past, now that the political right openly propagates a pointedly anti-intellectual ethos that disdains most forms of high culture. By the same token, the demand that literary scholarship be politically efficacious in an immediate and measurable sense is perhaps unrealistic in the first place: even more socially relevant criticism has inherent limitations when it is confined to the practice of an academic discipline.

It is true that I have myself made a political statement of sorts in this book, since I have insisted on the congruence between middle-brow poetic blandness and reactionary thought, and argued that the state sponsorship of mediocrity is not beneficial to culture. My aim, however, is not to change the world but to preserve a space in it for the vibrant poetic culture that has been the mainstay of my life. I believe, with Charles Bernstein, that poetry can only matter if it offers something different, something not easily reducible to other, non-aesthetic values.

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