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## Imperial Lyric

Middlebrook, Leah

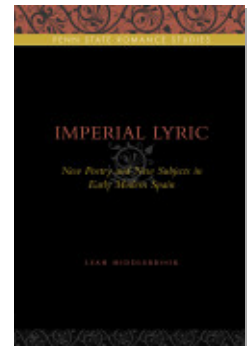
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## CODA: THE TOMB OF POETRY

WHEN THE LICENSE, THE PRESTIGE, and the energies of poetry are appropriated by the hegemonic institutions of the church and the state, and when they are directed to the political end of glorifying state-sponsored subjects, are they still poetic energies?

The Introduction and chapters of this book have traced a long circle. We opened in the melancholic tenor of the baroque and with Francisco de Aldana's bitter Sonnet 45, in which the heroic Castilian fighting arm is portrayed as having been crushed beneath the discursive and representational armatures of the contemporary age. I then traced the path by which the new lyric movement of which the sonnet formed an important part became aligned with Hapsburg modernity. As Juan Boscán reoriented Spanish poetry from its traditional function of celebrating Castilian heroes in song, he appropriated the authority of poetic discourse to stabilize the identity of a new Spanish nobleman. The Italian-styled mode of courtliness he promoted through his lyrics and his writings on poetics answered to the demands that were being placed on men by the nascent Spanish Hapsburg regime and thus participated in transformations in notions of the self that are commonly associated with the onset of social modernity. But in a manner that is perhaps less immediately visible, the adoption of the new lyric also marked an important threshold for poetic modernity, as the role assigned to poetry within culture changed. To adopt the forms and the stylistic conventions of the new lyric entailed breaking with the idea of singer-poets existing in a continuum across the generations as human channels for the transmission of native tradition. The new lyric reflected and helped to normalize a new social mandate for a poetry whose scope was significantly reduced. The private, urbane poet is not celebrated for his or her capacities to conserve the fundamentals of culture and history; he or she is praised for skill in mastering and channeling poetic language such that it

can be accommodated to modern dimensions: the rational and circumspect individual who is bound, circumscribed, and traversed by human-authored regimes of power and knowledge in a desacralized—if not necessarily a secular—world. What makes the sixteenth century of special interest to those of us who think about poetics is the fact that this was the first time that this more modest poetry, the lyric, became associated with privilege and authority.

But did this shift represent, in fact, the end of poetry, in its premodern sense? Discussing the rise of the lyric—the substitution of a poetics of Horace for the poetics of Homer—Susan Stewart has observed that the lyric poet works “under a threat of overdetermination (that the Orphic creator might turn back tragically against himself, inadvertently losing the work through adherence to habit or convention), and under a threat of underdetermination (that the freedom of creation could be rooted only in the particular history of the creator)” (12).<sup>1</sup> More recently, Virginia Jackson has complicated the epic/lyric distinction by taking a more concrete and historicizing perspective on poems in culture. The “lyricization” of poetry, a process that she understands to have culminated in the nineteenth century, produced the strange situation in which we find ourselves at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first, as poetry is simultaneously overvalued as essential to our cultural survival and mourned as irretrievably marginal to the information-centered and resolutely prosaic contemporary world. This dilemma may be more acute in academic circles in the United States than it is among poets and scholars in Europe, and, specifically, in Spain. As Jesús Munárriz pointed out in his anthology *Un siglo de sonetos en español*, the lyric tradition, and most especially the tradition of the sonnet, has thrived continuously in Spain and in the Spanish Americas (10). But Jackson’s point is that the hegemony of lyric poetry in the post-Romantic era has confounded our ability as critics to discuss the nature and function of poetic discourse. “Poetry,” at present, serves as a sort of shorthand term for a vast spectrum of poems, “songs, riddles, epigrams, sonnets, epitaphs, blazons, leider, elegies, marches, dialogues, conceits, ballads, epistles, hymns, odes,

1. In these comments, Stewart (*Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*) is engaging in dialogue with remarks by Grossman in *The Sighted Singer*. In particular, she builds on Grossman’s point, mentioned in the Introduction (note 7) of this book, that poetics break on the distinction between Homer and Horace, and that the Horatian model threatens to devolve into “mere” self-legitimation. As I mentioned, Horace himself called attention to the potential trap, and the Homer-Horace distinction becomes a touchstone through critical writings on poetry.

eclogues and monodramas considered lyric in the Western tradition before the early nineteenth century,” all of which have been conflated into a single genre:

When the stipulative functions of particular genres are collapsed into one big idea of poems as lyrics, then the only function poems can perform in our culture is to become individual or communal ideals . . . the more ideally lyric poems and poetry culture have become, the fewer actual poetic genres address readers in specific ways. That ratio is responsible for our twenty-first century sense that poetry is all-important and at the same time already in its afterlife. (183)

This insight holds true for European critics and poets as well as those reading and writing in the United States. Moreover, as we have seen perhaps most clearly in the writings of Garcilaso and Herrera, some sixteenth-century writers were acutely aware of their position on the frontiers of a discursive movement aimed at severing the relationship between poetry and “real life.” Jackson fixes her argument to the context of “the single abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric” (183), but in Chapter 4 of this study we observed Herrera struggling to create a heroic lyric that would compensate for the obsolescence of epic and ballad forms rendered obsolete by the religious and courtly ideologies by which Counter-Reformation Spanish culture was organized under Philip II.

The lyrics by Herrera and his close contemporary Aldana studied here ultimately responded to the new order of things in the melancholic key that Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor has diagnosed as the principal note of the Spanish baroque: “energías amargas, discursos de la desesperanza del mundo y también articulaciones de la *atra bilis*, del ‘humor negro,’ que fueron entonces la marca del intelectual entregado a lo que pronto se le relevaría como *vanas cogitaciones*, y al que amenaza siempre una inminente remisión de la voz” (*Barroco*, 21) (“Bitter energies, discourses of despair for the world and also articulations of the *atra bilis*, the ‘black bile,’ which were then the mark of the intellectual absorbed in what would soon be revealed as *vanas cogitaciones*, and which were threatened, always, by an immanent postponement of the voice”). In a more jocular and prosaic vein, Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616) presented his own view of the complete evacuation of traditional ideals of both heroism and poetry in the era of the Hapsburgs. His satirical *soneto con estrambote*, or “sonnet with

a tail,” “Al Túmulo del Rey Felipe II En Sevilla,” puts paid to the quest for heroic lyric:

Al Túmulo del Rey Felipe II En Sevilla

Voto a Dios que me espanta esta grandeza  
 y que diera un doblón por describilla!,  
 porque, a quién no suspende y maravilla  
 esta máquina insigne, esta braveza?  
 Por Jesucristo vivo, cada pieza  
 vale más de un millón, y que es mancilla  
 que esto no dure un siglo, o gran Sevilla,  
 Roma triunfante en ánimo y riqueza!  
 Apostaré que el ánima del muerto,  
 por gozar este sitio, hoy ha dejado  
 el cielo, de que goza eternamente.  
 Esto oyó un valentón y dijo: “Es cierto  
 lo que dice voacé, seor soldado,  
 y quien dijere los contrario miente.”  
 Y luego, incontinente,  
 caló el chapeo, requirió la espada,  
 miró al soslayo, fuése, y no hubo nada.

[To the Coffin of King Philip II, in Seville: “I swear to God I’m amazed by this grandeur, and I’d give a gold piece to be able to describe it! for who is not overwhelmed and astounded by this spectacular structure, this fierceness? By Jesus, every item is worth a fortune, and it’s a shame that it can’t last a century, oh great Seville, a Rome triumphant in spirit and in wealth! I’ll bet that the soul of the departed, to enjoy this place, today has come down from heaven, where he enjoys eternal glory.” A braggart heard this and replied, “It’s true what you say, mister soldier, and anybody that says otherwise lies.” And then, straightaway, he set his cap, clutched at his sword, looked askance, walked off, and there was nothing.]<sup>2</sup>

2. This poem is collected by Rivers in *Muses and Masks* (42–43). I have used his translation, with a minor adjustment to the ending, which Rivers translates as, “and nothing happened.”

Obliquely based on a conventional scene of feudal loyalty, in which the mourning vassal visits the tomb of his master, this poem invokes heroic and virile preoccupations: great oaths (lines 1 and 5), the humble man's wonder at the great monuments erected by his king (lines 1 through 6), Rome and her legacies of imperial splendor (line 8), the passage of time (lines 6 and 7). But while the language is present, the culture that once infused it with meaning is not. Cervantes undermines grandiose contemporary conventions with his characteristic virtuosity: the solemn oath becomes a mild curse of wonder issuing from the mouth of a common infantryman; his awe at the great monument derives from his estimation of its cost, a fortune perceived as all the more striking because he assumes that the masterpiece is ephemeral.

In the coarse, burlesque language of the poem and the wry interchange of its two interlocutors, Cervantes is as usual injecting a dose of pragmatic realism into the representation of the Spanish monarch and his relationship with his subjects. But he is also saying something important about contemporary poetry and, specifically, about the new lyric and the sonnet form that was its clearest emblem. Far from commemorating the sayings and the actions of the great, the sonnet had become, by the time Philip II died,<sup>3</sup> the tomb of poetry, a verbal artifact whose significance in the late sixteenth century resided most powerfully in its rectangular, blocklike shape that resembles both a stamp of authority and a funerary monument. The words that constitute this kind of poem, according to Cervantes, have no capacity to mean. The soldier-speaker would give a gold piece to complete a successful act of description, but he cannot, and when the work indulges in contemporary decadent permissiveness to allow itself three extra lines, the result is precisely, nothing: *nada* (line 17). Bloated and distorted by the addition of the three extra lines, the poem performs the exact opposite of a commemorative function, fixing no image in place, erroneously foretelling the fall of the monument and claiming ignorance of the king's name.

In content and attitude, Cervantes's sonnet resembles certain of the *novelas ejemplares*, and reminds us of his position on the fulcrum between the Spain of poetry and the Spain of prose. The era in which the lyric was overtaking epic as the principal poetic mode was also the era in which poetry was losing ground to this rival discourse, which was crossing over from the field of legislation to assume increasing popularity and prestige as

3. Philip II died in 1598.

the language by which to represent human existence and experience. And it is notable that the first volume of the *Quijote*, published in 1605, opens with an extended lampoon of what had by then become a reflexive gesture in the early modern publishing world, namely, the inclusion in the prefatory pages of a book of as many sonnets as an author and a publisher could muster. Cervantes takes evident pleasure in including among his sonneteers a figure no less authoritative than Babieca, the famed steed of the Cid, who sets forth his praise for Rocinante in a suitable Renaissance encomium. By 1615, as Cervantes was publishing the second part of the work, it no longer seemed necessary to acknowledge the tattered remains of poetic prestige. In part due to the changes he himself had wrought on the Spanish culture of letters, Cervantes felt licensed to open the novel in the key of the novel, with his attack on the false *Quijote*, before embarking down the convoluted and ever more powerful modern course of metafiction.

On the other hand, if we examine Cervantes's writings and the culture of peninsular poetry more carefully, it emerges that it was not all poetry that was consigned to the tomb. While flatly suspicious of any use of the forms and conventions of the new lyric that fell outside the range of the amatory, Cervantes viewed the Castilian ballad, or *romance*, as a still-viable form. Furthermore, in the Americas, both the romance and the emergent *silva*, a type of poem that maintained strong links to Dantean canzone and the prophetic biblical songs that would ground it in the idea of poetry as poesis, flourished as members of the Creole and European-identified lettered elites sought to stabilize the identity of the Spanish-American subject.<sup>4</sup> While peninsular writers experienced poetic modernity as a substitution of Horace for Homer, mid- to late-sixteenth century lettered elites working in the Americas attempted to *displace* the restrictions of Horace and set Dante and Ovid in place as the poetic foundations for a transatlantic identity as citizens of a global city of letters.<sup>5</sup> In the vice-realms of the Americas, the rise of the lyric held forth the tantalizing promise of expansion, both in the spectrum of viable modern identities and in the genre of poetry itself. In the Old World, however, the intersection of poetry and Hapsburg politics had transformed the genre of the *diestro braco* into a reliquary.

4. On the career of the new lyric in the New World, see the excellent overview provided by González Echevarría in "Colonial Lyric."

5. The phrase is taken from the classic study by Rama, *La ciudad letrada*.