The Twilight of the Avant-Garde

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Published by Liverpool University Press

Mayhew, Jonathan.
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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 so 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 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 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.