The Twilight of the Avant-Garde

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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. 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.

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 extravaganza.)

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. (Paraisos 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 subjecthood 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 liricos,
es ya cosa de tomar a broma. Como a broma tomaríamos a un guardia municipal que se atribuyese el papel histórico de Napoleón. (Paraisos 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,
accomodating 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. 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 focuses 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}
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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 mellifluent 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

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

Toda rosa es de sombra
y es fugaz, y se espance, 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, 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 paralización, 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, implicitamente 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) and Rimado de cuidad (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 cuidad, 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 under-states 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 con las mismas expectativas que el poeta y sus presuntos lectores tienen que sobrevivir” (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).