The Twilight of the Avant-Garde

Jonathan Mayhew

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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. 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 poneña (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 Mitrídates Eupátor, rey del Ponto (132 a 63 a. de J.C.) y con la diligenicia, fría hasta en el amor, de Kratevas, médico y botánico en la servidumbre científica de Mitrídates, 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 Krato, 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. 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 vomito y los clisteres, pero les socorremos en particular con aguamiel o leche de borraca. Son también saludables el vino pasado con anís, las pechugas de gallina, las langostas marinhas y los camarones. (64)

(Those who have swallowed dorcynio, called by some solatro furioso [belladona], 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. 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 menstruo 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 blanquisima 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 cria 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), Gamoneda 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. On the other hand, Gamoneda 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 mythical.

While Gamoneda admits to having modernized Laguna’s language, reducing its unfamiliarity and archaic qualities, his own language seems archaic in some respects. 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 faldades 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 a 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.

Gamoneda 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. Kratevas, a botanist or “root
“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 Mitridates. 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 Mitridates. 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 Mitridates, que hemos de dar por perdidas) cuando, vencido el Eupátor y voluntariamente yugulado por la obediencia de un servidor gálatara, ya que, dicho está, Mitridates 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 Crateuas, 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 cuenta 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 profundad 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. Also, one accustomed to Gamoneda’s other works would not expect a flight of Borgesian invention from this usually sober and unironic poet.

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
Antonio Gamoneda’s Libro de los venenos

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. 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 tranformed 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).

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. 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.” 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” (conscienciness 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 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. 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). 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.

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.

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.

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*.

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.

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 “guiños de ojo.”

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).

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).

Gil de Biedma does not actually limit himself to such “palabras de familia”: his verbal surfaces are quite varied.

The figure of Mithridates in Gamoneda’s text is an easily identifiable cultural archetype (or stereotype): the cruel and sensual “Oriental Despot.”

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).

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).