

CLAUDIO RODRÍGUEZ AND THE WRITING OF THE MASCULINE BODY

RAMÓN de Garciasol, reviewing Claudio Rodríguez's first book, *Don de la ebriedad*, praised the young poet for his rugged Castilian virility: "Claudio Rodríguez puede al verso, le gobierna con mano viril" (7). When I first came upon this quote several years ago, in the course of writing a dissertation on Rodríguez's poetry, I rejected it as an uncomprehending and inappropriate response to a highly complex work of metapoetry, an absurdly gratuitous intrusion of *machismo* into a context in which the author's gender was simply irrelevant. While rejecting Garciasol's blatant sexism, however, I was making a highly questionable assumption of my own: that Rodríguez's poetry somehow transcended gender. By dismissing out of hand the relevance of the poet's "virility," I was committing the familiar error of equating the masculine with the universal.

It should not be surprising to learn that Claudio Rodríguez writes as a man rather than as an impossibly genderless human subject. No one would claim otherwise; in fact, the point seems too obvious to be of any real significance. In what non-trivial sense, then, does Rodríguez's poetry reflect a particularly "masculine" vision? One approach to this question would be to identify masculinity with misogyny, canvassing the poet's work for sexist attitudes. Rodríguez does occasionally identify feminine figures with negative aspects of reality, especially deceptiveness ("Brujas a mediodía," 127-30). A related avenue of investigation is the poet's relation to his mother, a figure that appears in several poems from *Conjuros* and *Alianza y Condena*. A biographically minded critic could interpret these texts in light of the poet's problematical relation to his mother.¹

This piecemeal approach to the question, while potentially valuable, unnecessarily limits the field of inquiry to poems that deal directly with women or femininity. I would contend that masculinity informs Claudio Rodríguez's vision at a deeper level. As Garciasol points out in his review of *Don de la ebriedad*, "nadie somos ajenos a nuestra arquitectura carnal" (7). Rodríguez's poetic vision is rooted in a specifically masculine understanding of the body and of the psyche.² The two poems analyzed below symbolically enact a process in which the subject attempts to come to terms with the fluidity of his ego-boundaries. In the first text, "Como si nunca hubiera sido mía," from *Don de la ebriedad*, the speaker attempts to achieve an erasure of the boundaries which separate his body from the natural world. "Espuma," one of the best-known poems in *Alianza y Condena*, offers a somewhat different situation: here the dissolution of the

¹ For an account of Rodríguez's early years see Cañas 15-34.

² For the purposes of this essay I do not attempt to determine whether this understanding of the body is determined culturally or biologically.

ego leads to a symbolic rebirth that ultimately reinforces a more traditional masculine identity.³

One significant tendency within feminist criticism is the attempt to locate the femininity of writing in the body itself. Critics inspired by French feminism establish a binary opposition between two modes of writing: while *écriture féminine* is fluid, open, and polymorphous, masculine writing is closed and unitary. According to this theory, a truly authentic women's writing would express the female body, avoiding the imitation of "phallic" models of discourse. Many recent critics of French feminism have protested that this model imposes an excessively undifferentiated view of the female subject, thus eliding cultural and social factors that divide real women from one another.⁴ My concern is with the way in which this model also oversimplifies writing by men. While such writing does often conform to a rhetorically and ideologically closed position, the assumption of a unitary "phallic" discourse is too simplistic. It leaves the critic with only two options: to demonstrate that masculine writing is guilty as charged (a foregone conclusion), or else to rescue the male writer from himself by uncovering a subversive undercurrent of sexual marginality. The caricature of a unitary phallic writing ignores any connection that might exist between writing by men and the male body. Or rather, it reduces this connection to a single metaphor: male sexuality is identified with the phallus – the metaphorical equivalent of the penis. Woman, in contrast, "has sexual organs more or less everywhere" (Irigaray 28). This theory limits the corporeal expression of masculine subjectivity to a single endeavour: the attempt to impose a phallogocentric unity onto discourse.

Another school of thought defines masculine identity as the search for autonomy or, negatively speaking, the fear of connectedness. According to Nancy Chodorow, the most influential exponent of this idea, "the selves of women and men tend to be constructed differently – women's self more in relation and involved with boundary negotiations, separation and connection, men's self more distanced and based on defensively firm boundaries and denials of self-other connection" (2). This difference is the result of traditional child-rearing practices. Whenever both male and female children are nurtured by mothers, male children are forced to break away from the feminine figure in order to achieve their identity as men: "Underlying, or built into, core male gender identity is an early, non-verbal, unconscious, almost somatic sense of primary oneness with the mother, an underlying sense of femaleness that continually, usually unnoticeably, but sometimes insistently, challenges and undermines the sense of maleness" (110). Women, in contrast, come by their identity much more easily, by simply identifying with their mothers. Although Chodorow's object-relations theory diverges considerably from the Lacanian paradigm that

³ The semiotic theory that I used in my previous study of Rodríguez's work had the unintended effect of neutralizing, and thereby neutering, the poet's masculine consciousness. My present reading does not necessarily contradict my earlier findings: my aim is to reveal consciousness of gender that underlies the poet's linguistic self-reflexivity.

⁴ Felski summarizes this and other objections to the work of Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous (33-48).

underlies the writing of French feminists, these two branches of feminist psychology ultimately converge in their view of masculinity as inherently negative, monolithic, and disconnected from the body.

Don de la ebriedad, as I have argued elsewhere, enacts the opposition between two opposing impulses: the desire to maintain a privileged poetic vision and the ethical imperative to renounce the egoism implicit in this vision.⁵ The ninth and final poem of "Libro Primero" represents the clearest example of the poet's renunciation of poetic privilege. In a dramatic gesture, the speaker disowns his own voice, casting it to the elements:

Como si nunca hubiera sido mía
 dad al aire mi voz y que en el aire
 sea de todos y la sepan todos
 igual que una mañana o una tarde.
 Ni a la rama tan sólo abril acude
 ni el agua espera sólo el estiaje.
 ¿Quién podría decir que es suyo el viento,
 suya la luz, el canto de las aves
 en el que esplende la estación, mas cuando
 llega la noche y en los chopos arde
 tan peligrosamente retenida?
 ¡Que todo acabe aquí, que todo acabe
 de una vez para siempre! La flor vive
 tan bella porque vive poco tiempo
 y, sin embargo, cómo se da, unánime,
 dejando de ser flor y convirtiéndose
 en ímpetu de la entrega. Invierno, aunque
 no esté detrás la primavera, saca
 fuera de mí lo mío y hazme parte,
 inútil polen que se pierde en tierra
 pero ha sido de todos y de nadie.
 Sobre el abierto páramo, el relente
 es pinar en el pino, aire en el aire,
 relente sólo para mi sequía.
 Sobre la voz que va excavando un cauce
 qué sacrilegio este del cuerpo, este
 de no poder ser hostia para darse. (40)

In the ethical scheme of *Don de la ebriedad*, the integrity of the body is an intrinsically immoral state, a "sacrilege." The poet's voice, equated with poetry itself, has the capacity to separate itself from his body and thus become one with the rest of nature, renouncing its origins in the proprietary body of a single individual. The poet wishes to purify himself by identifying his body with the "hostia," the sacramental equivalent of the body of Christ.

⁵ In semiotic terms, the poet-speaker identifies each of these options with a particular vision of language: the privileged poetic vision implies an arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, while the renunciation of this vision leads to a dissolution of human language and the search for the natural sign in which signifier and signified are one (Mayhew 25-55).

While the struggle to achieve an autonomous self is "masculine," as Chodorow defines the word, it would be a mistake to treat Rodríguez's renunciation of this autonomy as a "feminine" characteristic. His desire to erase the boundary between himself and the natural world reflects another dimension of male psychology. "Como si nunca hubiera sido mía" can be read as a symbolic analogue of the temporary erasure of boundaries that occurs with ejaculation. This interpretation might appear far-fetched at first glance. Yet the flower that appears midway through the text is one of the most commonly used metaphors for human reproduction. The comparison between the flower and male body establishes an equivalence between a man's sperm and "seed," a metaphor that is firmly established in the Western tradition. The image of the scattering of seeds on the earth ("inútil polen que se pierde en tierra") evokes the biblical condemnation of Onan, who is stricken dead after scattering his seed on the ground (*Genesis*, 38).

Onan's sin is not masturbation (one of the current dictionary definitions of *onanism*), but the waste of his "seed" through premature withdrawal. This is primarily an offense against the propagation of his own family line. *Genesis* depicts his refusal to impregnate Tamar, his brother's widow, as an act of selfishness: "And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother's wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother" (*Genesis* 38:9). Onan's unwillingness to act as his brother's surrogate leads to a further twist in the plot: when a promised marriage to a third brother fails to materialize, Tamar resorts to disguising herself as a prostitute in order to conceive a child by Judah, her father-in-law.

"Como si nunca hubiera sido mía" links the idea of the biological reproduction of one's family and self to the problem of literary survival. In renouncing his claim to the ownership of his poetic voice, his "seed," and his body, Rodríguez rejects the idea of the poem as a monument to the poet's unique subjectivity. Instead of preserving his own personality in language, he proposes anonymity as an ideal: as his poetic voice is dissolved into nature, his sacrifice of individuality will contribute, in some indefinable way, to the greater good. Like pollen from a flower, it is disseminated into the natural world, where it may or may not help to propagate the species. The poet's "onanism," his sacrifice of any proprietary interest in his own subjectivity, has an altruistic rather than a selfish goal. At the same time, the primary emphasis falls on the sacrifice of the self rather than on altruism per se. As in so much of Rodríguez's work, the poet attempts to expiate his guilt through a ritual purification ("No porque llueva seré digno," 39-40; "A mi ropa tendida," 83). The important thing is for the poet to renounce his own egoism: it does not much matter whether his selflessness is of any benefit to anything or anyone else.

In contrast to the ecstatic affirmation of selflessness of "Como si nunca hubiera sido mía," "Espuma" presents the loss of ego-boundaries as a temporary and salutary alteration of the body, from which the unitary self ultimately emerges whole and unscathed:

Miro la espuma, su delicadeza
que es tan distinta a la de la ceniza.

Como quien mira una sonrisa, aquella
 por la que da su vida, y le es fatiga
 y amparo, miro ahora la modesta
 espuma. Es el momento bronco y bello
 del uso, el roce, el acto de la entrega
 creándola. El dolor encarcelado
 del mar, se salva en fibra tan ligera;
 bajo la quilla, frente al dique, donde
 existe amor surcado, como en tierra
 la flor, nace la espuma. Y es en ella
 donde rompe la muerte, en su madeja
 donde el mar cobra ser, como en la cima
 de su pasión el hombre es hombre, fuera
 de otros negocios: en su leche viva.
 A este pretil, brocal de la materia,
 que es manantial, no desembocadura,
 me asomo ahora, cuando la marea
 sube, y allí naufrago, allí me ahogo
 muy silenciosamente, con entera
 aceptación, ileso, renovado
 en las espumas imperecederas. (151)

Like “Como si nunca hubiera sido mía,” this poem re-enacts the experience of ejaculation, the moment in which a man, at the height of his sexual passion, becomes truly a man, in his semen or “leche viva.” It is no stretch to see “espuma” as another metaphor for this bodily fluid. Like the sea-foam, it arises in moments of contact, friction, and surrender (*entrega*). In this context, the images of the plow furrowing the earth and the boat cutting through the water are also clearly sexual in meaning (“el amor surcado”).

The sexual climax leads to the symbolic drowning that occurs in the last sentence of “Espuma.” The association of sex with death has deep roots in the Western tradition: the discharge of semen is threatening because it is experienced as a loss of control over the body. At the poem’s close, however, the threat to the speaker’s ego is revealed to be *only* symbolic. The word *ileso* indicates that he will remain alive despite the threat of death implicit in the sexual act. The poet watches himself drown, but simultaneously holds himself back from the perilous waters that threaten to drown him. The conclusion of the poem produces a strong sense of closure; the renovation of the poet’s sense of self coincides with an eternalizing vision of nature.

“Espuma” is in many ways a traditional lyric poem, a verbal representation of a timeless moment of transcendence. Such poetry provides the subject with a symbolic catharsis, a temporary surrender of ego-boundaries that doesn’t entail any genuine risk. The rhetorical effects used in this poem are typical of both the lyric genre and of the poet’s specifically masculine consciousness. The speaker of the poem detaches his own self from that of the fictive self represented in the poem’s discourse: by the end of the poem it is clear that the *yo* of the speaker, the producer of the poem’s utterance, is no longer identical to the *yo* of the protagonist, the self who drowns in the water below.

The use of the “lyric present tense” reinforces this division within the poetic subject. While relating his or her own acts in the present (I eat breakfast, I

jump into the lake, I cover the waterfront) the writer of a lyric poem is usually sitting at a desk and writing. In order to resolve this contradiction, the experienced reader automatically splits the speaking (or writing) voice from the acting subject. At the same time, the disjunction between speaking and doing makes the activities represented seem more purely symbolic: the reader easily grasps the fact that nobody is really performing the actions related in the present tense. In "Espuma," the difference between real and symbolic action is especially evident when the poet appears to be in two places at once: leaning over the *pretel* and drowning in the water below. The poem is a symbolic enactment of a sexual act as experienced from a man's perspective. The transformation of the real into the symbolic also involves a process of sublimation, in which the poet's masculine sexuality comes to represent more transcendent and idealized values.

Both "Como si nunca hubiera sido mía" and "Espuma" are imaginative interpretations of ejaculation, a moment in which the masculine subject is threatened by a loss of control. In both texts the poetic subject is not the (falsely) universal "human being," but the male of the species. Still, the differences between the two texts are notable. The polished, closed perfection of "Espuma" contrasts with the somewhat rougher contours of the poem from *Don de la ebriedad*. "Como si nunca hubiera sido mía," in its rejection of the idea of a monument to the autonomous self, is a less traditional lyric poem which also reflects a less conventional masculinity. In this poem, the speaker wants to extend his temporary loss of self, to convert it into an ethical principle. The scattering of his "seed" on the earth is a selfless if not altruistic act, a revolt against the autonomy of the ego and the borders of the body. In "Espuma," the subject reimposes control over his body after the climax of his passion, separating it once again from the natural forces that threatened to engulf him. He remains content with an act of symbolic purification that allows for a facile reconstruction of masculine ego-boundaries.

Feminist critics, quite justifiably, identify masculinity with the repression of women. In an effort to develop a more nuanced view of Rodríguez's masculine writing, I have deliberately de-emphasized some of its obviously negative ramifications. It is true that a different selection of texts would have revealed Rodríguez's often problematic attitude toward femininity: poems such as "Brujas a mediodía," "Ahí mismo," and "Voz sin pérdida" come to mind. The two poems analyzed above, however, repress femininity only to the extent that they do not take it into account in any way. The genuine products of a masculine sensibility, they are androcentric but not, strictly speaking, misogynist.

The problem, in my view, is not the literary expression of the male body, but the enormous cultural privilege that such expression enjoys – and the corresponding marginalization of other perspectives. A poetic vision that is rooted in the masculine subject's understanding of his own sexuality is rarely perceived as parochial in any way. Even pornographic literature written by "great writers" is often read in universalistic terms. In reading poetry written by women, in contrast, critics tend to focus on the specificity of the feminine, especially when the imagery seems to be derived from the poet's understanding of her own body.

Rodríguez's masculine poetry is typically interpreted in highly idealistic, even reverential terms. The most obvious example of this tendency is the em-

phasis that critics place on the poet's "transcendence" of everyday reality (Bradford). Debicki, whose views have influenced many other critics, stresses how Rodríguez's work makes "ordinary events suggest very fundamental meanings" (40). It is true that this poetry transcends ordinary reality in the ways that the critics have detailed. The unquestioning praise of this transcendence, however, reproduces the ideology that gives masculinity its apparently universal appeal. Contemporary scholars no longer praise Rodríguez for his poetic virility, as Garciasol did almost forty years ago. Instead, they are simply complicitous with the poet's own sublimation of his sexuality.

My purpose here has been to situate Rodríguez's work in a somewhat different interpretive context. Most approaches to women poets take gender into account, whether the critic is feminist or not. Criticism written about male authors, in contrast, rarely examines masculinity as a problem. (The exceptions, of course, are feminist and gay critics, who tend to see traditional masculinity in a primarily negative light.) It is plausible, nevertheless, that gender is as significant for Rodríguez as it is for Rosalía de Castro, Gloria Fuertes, or Blanca Andreu. The poetry of Claudio Rodríguez, as I have argued, takes root in a peculiarly masculine mode of writing. Far from diminishing the value of his poetry, the critical study of his masculinity underscores the distinctiveness of his achievement.

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