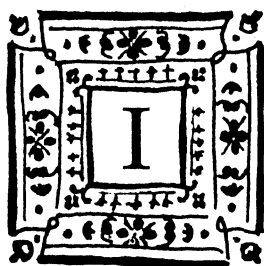




THE AVANT-GARDE AND ITS DISCONTENTS: AESTHETIC
CONSERVATISM IN RECENT SPANISH POETRY

JONATHAN MAYHEW
University of Kansas



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” capable of giving voice to experiences which are verisimilar to the common reader. Poetry should be, above all, “excelente literatura” (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? Yet this sensible position is actually a striking departure in the context of a poetic tradition that has valued transgression and marginality above all else. 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 contempt for a poetry of normality and common sense. They would never subscribe 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” (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.¹ 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, though not necessarily 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 am-

¹ For example, he associates avant-garde poetics with Hitler and Stalin, proposing his own version of poetry of experience as the political equivalent of Spain’s liberal democracy (“Felipe Benítez Reyes” 12).

bitiousness, which often makes the poem as aesthetic object seem less important than the larger poetic project to which it contributes.²

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)

This disclaimer begs the question of where the boundary between *normalidad* and *extravagancia* 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.

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

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.

revolutionary. Any difference from the norm (as opposed to a difference *within* it) becomes automatically suspect.³ 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. (*Paraísos y mundos* 44)

What is most striking in this passage is the overriding preoccupation with *el qué dirán*. The poet’s stylistic limitations are determined, not by artistic necessities, but by a fear of social ridicule. The pejorative 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 a recent book:

Here the question is not whether certain kinds of speech uttered by a subject are censored, but how a certain operation of censorship

³ 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.

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' 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 create an aesthetic revolution. It is in this sense that Benítez Reyes' notion of "excelente literatura," while unobjectionable on its face, has 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 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 líricos, es ya cosa de tomar a broma. Como a broma tomaríamos a un guardia municipal que se atribuyese el papel histórico de Napoleón. (*Paraísos y mundos* 30)

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 las 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)

Since it is hard to fathom Gimferrer or Carnero, or any other prominent *novísimo* poet, disliking poetry, such a statement can only be understood as a rejection 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. 187–88

When García Montero uses phrases like “el intelectualismo metálico” or “el formulador de doctrinas racionalistas en verso,” he falls back on a complacent acceptance of this “poetic run-of-the-mill” (15).

The conservative view, as I understand it, emphasizes the constraints on human possibilities. There are natural limits to what humans can do—limits that coincide, to the conservative mind, with socially defined norms. Those who attempt to break with these norms are accused of going against the inevitable order of things. The hostility of 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—shame and ridicule.

According to García Montero, “estos poetas de la experiencia no critican la mirada vanguardista por gusto reaccionario” (“Felipe

Benítez Reyes" 18). Such disclaimers raise the question of how a 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. This point has some validity, but 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 has its 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 with 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 experimentation. 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.

It is no accident, 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 del poeta en 1956* 144)

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 itself.

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 "poetas como Blas de Otero, José Hierro, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Ángel González, José Manuel Caballero Bonald o 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 this style. The passionate political and existential anguish of Otero, the biting irony of Gil de Biedma, the baroque, self-deconstructing idiolect of Caballero Bonald, Brines' metaphysical depth, and Rodríguez' visionary mode, to mention only some fairly obvious examples, demonstrate that the best poetry of the 1950s manifests a stylistic and aesthetic richness and diversity that is belied by a general rubric like "poetry of experience."

The risk inherent in 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" (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 pretention.⁴ 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)

This is not bad writing in any sense of the word; 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 someone with a close sentimental relation to “las leyes de un género.” 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 readers’ generic expectations, since this tone remains just “lyrical” enough to remain within relatively safe generic boundaries.

Since Gil de Biedma is an oft-cited model for García Montero, a comparative look at 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”:

⁴ *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) y *Rimado de ciudad* (1981–92), 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 ciudad*, Benítez Reyes’ *Vidas improbables*, or Amparo Amorós’ *Quevediana* (which is anthologized in *Visiones y destinos*) 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.

¡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)

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)

Both poems depict a process of self-discovery through the shared motif of “going to bed with one’s self.” What for Gil de Biema 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’s poem, “a melancholic but low-keyed mood” (205). 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 missing in García Montero’s revival of a “poetry of experience” is precisely the radical critique of the social 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.⁵ Felipe Benítez Reyes' relation to the tradition of modern poetics is a good deal more ambivalent. While his prose statements occasionally incur 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' work superficially resembles that of García Montero's. 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 its 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)

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 clear link between the signifier and the signified. Benítez Reyes, in contrast, has no confidence at all in the

⁵ Debicki and Villena offer more positive views of García Montero. The former points to its stylistic variety and to the complexity of its subjective effects (203–05). His attempt to apologize for the conservatism of García Montero and other poets of the 1980s understates 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 y al fin con más personalidad, los postulados de una renovada poética de la experiencia" (*Fin de siglo 25*).

capacity of art to capture the essence of a lived experience. In “La diferencia,” the poet remains 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’ 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’ poetry is its great musicality; his ostentatiously mellifluous 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’ 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
que alguien por cortesía extiende sobre el mármol
de luna helada y muerta?

Toda rosa es de sombra
y es fugaz, y se esparce, 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).

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’ 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’ 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 como por lo que no ha vivido, que es, creo, la manifestación de la melancolía en este final de siglo de las grandes innovaciones literarias y artísticas.” Benítez Reyes’ 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 semi-parodic.

Benítez Reyes’ *Vidas improbables* (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 po-

ems of “La poetisa Amita Lo,” for example, reflect a rather stereotypical version of women’s writing. Taken as a whole, then, *Vidas improbables* represents only a partial departure from the generally conservative ethos of Benítez Reyes’ poetry.⁶

One of Benítez Reyes’ 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)

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” (76).

This commentary can be taken ironically; the nasty homophobic reference is a particularly blatant clue, given Benítez Reyes’ manifest admiration for gay poets such as Auden, Cernuda, and Gil de Biedma. Still, the demonstration that the poetry of experience is susceptible to parodic treatment, just like any other style, suggests that Benítez Reyes is distancing himself from the experiential mode: Arana’s poems 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.

While the aesthetic conservatism identified with the revival of “la poesía de la experiencia” is, perhaps, the dominant force

⁶ For a negative view of *Vidas improbables*, and of Benítez Reyes’ poetic work in its entirety, see 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).

among one particularly well-known group of younger Spanish poets, modernist and avant-garde ideals have not lost their power of seduction. Although García Montero argues for a de-sacralized conception of poetry, some of the best poets of the 1950s generation—Claudio Rodríguez, Francisco Brines, Antonio Gamoneda, José Angel Valente, María Victoria Atencia—are those for whom poetry remains, in some sense, the last refuge of the sacred. These are not avant-garde poets: they do not attempt to shock the bourgeois reader in an outmoded way, nor do they extravagantly celebrate their own egos. Nevertheless, they remain faithful to a visionary conception of poetry inherited from poets such as Rimbaud, Rilke, and Saint-John Perse.

Another option for contemporary Spanish poetry is a deliberately subversive, avant-garde mode. Leopoldo María Panero, one of the original *Nueve novísimos*, practices exactly the sort of extravagant and gratuitously shocking poetry, based on the model of the *poète maudit*, that García Montero and Benítez Reyes would reject out of hand. Among younger women poets, avant-gardism remains particularly strong. Blanca Andreu's *De una niña de provincias que se vino a vivir en un Chagall*, one of the most controversial books of the 1980s, provided a model for many young poets. Andreu does not aim for a well-modulated plain style, but for the exploration of extreme states of consciousness, including those induced by drugs. Her models are not Auden and Gil de Biedma, but Rimbaud, Lorca, and Rilke. Ramón Buenaventura's *Las diosas blancas* brought many young poets, several of them directly inspired by Andreu, to the attention of the reading public. The back cover of the anthology features a quotation by Rimbaud that captures the avant-garde spirit of these younger women: "La mujer hará sus hallazgos en lo desconocido. ¿Serán sus mundos de ideas distintos de los nuestros?— Descubrirá cosas extrañas, insondables, repulsivas, deliciosas; nosotros las recogeremos, las comprenderemos."

There are, then, multiple options available to the contemporary Spanish poet. Given this potentially broad range of poetic projects, the conservative move to limit the lyric genre to the expression of an unambitious private sensibility appears particularly exclusionary. 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 "experi-

ence" 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' 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.

WORKS CITED

- Amorós, Amparo. *Visión y destino: Poesía, 1982–1992*. Madrid: La Palma, 1992.
- Andreu, Blanca. *De una niña de provincias que se vino a vivir en un Chagall*. Edición revisada y aumentada. Madrid: Hiperión, 1983.
- Benítez Reyes, Felipe. *Paraísos y mundos (Poesía reunida 1979–1991 y otros poemas)*. Madrid: Hiperión, 1996.
- . *Poesía (1979–1987)*. Madrid: Hiperión, 1992.
- . *Sombras particulares (1988–1991)*. Madrid: Visor, 1992.
- . *Vidas improbables*. Madrid: Visor, 1995.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Ed. Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- Buenaventura, Ramón, ed. *Las diosas blancas: Antología de la joven poesía española escrita por mujeres*. 2nd ed. Madrid: Hiperión, 1986.
- Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Cañas, Dionisio. "2001 poesía española: ¿la frontera final?" In *Spain Today: Essays on Literature, Culture, Society*. Ed. José Colmeiro, et al. Hanover: Dartmouth College, 1995. 129–38.
- Debicki, Andrew P. *Spanish Poetry of the Twentieth Century: Modernity and Beyond*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1994.
- García Montero, Luis. *Además*. Madrid: Hiperión, 1994.
- . *Diario cómplice*. Madrid: Hiperión, 1987.
- . *Las flores del frío*. Madrid: Hiperión, 1991.
- . "Felipe Benítez Reyes, la poesía después de la poesía." In Benítez Reyes, *Poesía*. 9–25.

- . *Poesía: cuartel de invierno*. 2nd edition. Madrid: Hiperión, 1988.
- García Montero, Luis, and Antonio Muñoz Molina. *¿Por qué no es útil la literatura?* Madrid: Hiperión, 1993.
- Gil de Biedma, Jaime. *Diario del poeta en 1956*. Barcelona: Lumen, 1991.
- . *Las personas del verbo*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981.
- Martín, Salustiano. "Rev. of Felipe Benítez Reyes' *Paraísos y mundos*." *Reseña* 280 (febrero 1997): 40.
- Villena, Luis Antonio de, ed. *Fin de siglo: antología (El sesgo clásico en la última poesía española)*. Madrid: Visor, 1992.

