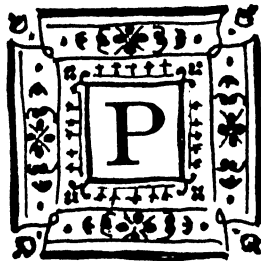




THE TWILIGHT OF THE AVANT-GARDE:
SPANISH POETRY IN THE 1980s

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. . . what to make of a diminished thing
(Robert Frost)



PERHAPS the single most significant development in Spanish poetry of the most recent decade is a waning of the avant-garde impulse that has animated modern poetry from the early years of the twentieth century. One anthologist characterizes the poetry of the 1980s as “una poesía ‘moderna’ que por primera vez en este siglo, no se identifica con vanguardia” (Barella 14). One symptom of the times is a changed attitude toward the literary and artistic past. The founding gesture of the avant-garde is a break with tradition. The modern artist makes use of cultural monuments by rewriting them, wrenching them from their original contexts: Duchamp paints a moustache on the Mona Lisa and provides an obscene caption. A similar attitude is evident in the last self-proclaimed avant-garde in Spanish letters, the *novísimos* of the late 1960s and 1970s. Questioning the artistic stultification of the immediate post-war period, these writers revindicate the poetic modernity of the prewar period. In spite of the considerable distance between the postmodernism of the 1970s and the modernism of earlier decades, the *novísimos* view themselves as a new manifestation of the avant-garde tradition of twentieth-century art.

The “culturalism” of the *novísimos* is often manifested in the form of a collage of intertextual references. A few of these poets work to invert traditional cultural hierarchies, privileging the detritus of culture over the canonical texts of Occidental literature: the poetry of Leopoldo María Panero and José María Álvarez comes to mind. Most of the *novísimos*, however, maintain a much more conservative (or conservationist) attitude toward the tradition. The poets who began to publish in the late 1970s and early 1980s have continued the more conservative tendency manifested in the work of poets such as Antonio Colinas. In contrast to the aggressive critique of culture undertaken by Panero or Álvarez, these younger writers often accept without question the value of traditionally prestigious works of art and literature.

In the work of Spanish poets of the 1980s, the citation of cultural intertexts often functions as an appropriation of aesthetic prestige from previously consumed conventions and artifacts. In this paper I propose to analyze this process of re-appropriation as a form of *kitsch*.¹ This will entail a slight shift in the application of the term, which is often simply synonymous with bad taste or mass art: “To call something kitsch is in most cases a way of rejecting it outright as distasteful, repugnant, or even disgusting” (Calinescu 235). My definition, derived from Umberto Eco, emphasizes the dilution or trivialization of “high art” rather than the ugliness of the object. According to Eco, *kitsch* involves the prefabrication of self-consciously “artistic” effects. In this respect it refers more to the consumption than to the production of art works, since masterpieces are often the works that lend themselves most easily to trivialization:

To love the Mona Lisa because it represents Mystery, or Ambiguity, or Ineffable Grace, or the Eternal Feminine, or because it is a more or less “sophisticated” topic of conversation (“Was it really a woman?” “Just think: one more brush stroke and that smile would have been different”) means to accept a particular message not for itself but because of a previous decoding which, having now stiffened into a formula, sticks to the message like a tag. (Eco 197)

Although *kitsch* generally connotes popular consumption in ad-

¹Some critics might wish to argue that some the *novísimos* are also practitioners of *kitsch*. In this case the contrast between the poets of the 1980s and their slightly older contemporaries would be less clear-cut.

dition to aesthetic dilution, not all mass culture shares *kitsch*'s highbrow pretensions. Inversely, although *kitsch* often reaches a large audience, it is not necessarily an art for the masses. The vicarious aesthetic of *kitsch* can also underlie works that appeal primarily to a cultural elite. Among recent Spanish poets, in fact, the vicarious and private nature of aesthetic experience often corresponds to an indifference to the marketplace. Their work is rarely aesthetically jarring, and thus does not resemble the tacky mass-produced decorative objects commonly labelled as *kitsch*. Nevertheless, this poetry acquires its specifically "literary" quality at second hand, deriving its aesthetic validity from the canonical aesthetic traditions of the past.

The younger Spanish poets' cannibalization of the literary tradition and their continued reliance on the *topoi* of the post-romantic lyric considerably reduce the range and scope of poetry. The dilution of the avant-garde impulse in Spanish poetry leads to an extremely limited and conventional view of the possibilities of the genre. Critics have insisted on the diversity of aesthetic postures assumed by the younger poets of the 1980s. Somewhat illogically, eclecticism itself is taken to be a "generational" signpost (Barella 9; Villena 18-20). Still, a relatively coherent picture does emerge from a reading of representative books and anthologies of the decade.² Following Summerhill, I find a "surprisingly high degree of similarity" among younger Spanish poets (108). Although generalizations are risky, it is difficult to discern the tremendous variety of aesthetic postures that these anthologists have touted. In contrast to the *novísimos*, who experiment with the limits of lyric poetry, the best-known poets of the 1980s remain content with an essentially conservative view of the genre. In addition to the vicarious aesthetic shared by many young poets, the operative conventions in their poetry include: 1) a deliberately sentimental, melancholic tone, with frequent echoes of the poetry of Francisco Brines, 2) a fixation on adolescence, 3) a desire to preserve an eternal moment of lyric

²Summerhill notes the practical difficulties of studying very recent poetry (103). Following his lead, I have consulted Villena's *Postnovísimos*, Barella's *Después de la modernidad* and García Martín's *La generación de los ochenta*, as well as individual volumes by many of the poets included in these anthologies. Buenaventura's overtly sexist anthology, *Las diosas blancas*, collects the work of numerous women poets of the 1980s. Although these writers are not immune from the temptations of *kitsch*, their work raises other issues that are beyond the scope of my argument here.

experience, 4) an emphasis on the fragility and belatedness of the lyric *yo*, and 5) a pastiche of the great landmarks of modern poetry.

Like the *novísimos* of the 1960s and 1970s, recent Spanish poets allude to both popular and elite culture, often juxtaposing the two. References to the privileged texts of Western civilization, however, are especially frequent in the new poets of the 1980s. Even in their citation of less privileged traditions such as jazz or cinema, they tend to strike a reverential pose. In contrast to the openly critical stance of many of the *novísimos*, they appear more willing to take for granted the validity of established culture, whatever its provenance, and to subsume their own voices into an ongoing tradition.

The work of Juan Lamillar (Sevilla, 1957) demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the vicarious poetics that is so prevalent among poets of his age group. In a review of *Muro contra la muerte*, Felipe Benítez Reyes, himself anthologized in García Martín, Barella, and Villena, reveals the basic assumptions that animate Lamillar's poetry:

Los asuntos de su libro están en lo cotidiano, pero también están pasados, y muy bien pasados, por el filtro de la literatura, del arte, que pone a la cotidianidad, a la pequeña esfera que es la vida de cualquier individuo, las invisibles alas con las que en el texto poético se eleva a la altura necesaria para que no la veamos ni demasiado cerca ni demasiado perdida en los celajes brumosos de la abstracción.

The life of the individual poet is a "pequeña esfera," insignificant in itself and unrelated to any outside forces. Art is a filter through which everyday life must pass in order to gain literary legitimization. As Calinescu notes, "kitsch lends itself to a definition in terms of a systematic attempt to fly from daily reality" (244).

In his praise of Lamillar, Benítez Reyes privileges aesthetic distance, the idea that literature should shield the reader from the harshness—or in this case the boredom—of life. This doctrine represents the polar opposite of the "poetry of experience" of the 1950s and 1960s. The reader's relation to the reality depicted in a literary text is inevitably vicarious, indirect. Nevertheless, poets of the 1950s and 1960s such as Jaime Gil de Biedma, Ángel González, and José Ángel Valente envision the poet's task to be one of intensifying the force of lived experience rather than straining it through an aesthetic filter. Significantly, Benítez Reyes also rejects cerebral abstraction, "los celajes brumosos de la abstracción." Lamillar's

poetry, he implies, has none of the aggressive intellectuality that can be seen in poets of previous generations.

The aesthetic “filter” in Lamillar’s work often takes the form of explicit allusions to other works of art and literature. “Amor en claroscuro,” from *Música oscura*, provides a good example of this technique:

Cuando el recuerdo nos lo exija
escribiremos tal vez sobre esta tarde
de soñada nieve y de versos de Rilke,
de amor en claroscuro.
Pondremos el jazz sobre el papel
como una taza de jazmín humeante,
de embriagadoras sombras enemigas.
Habremos de escribir sobre estas horas,
sobre esta misma llegada de la noche
con su disfraz de maga.
Tú estás volviendo al mundo
(a tu mundo de sueños)
y yo anoto con calma, con minucia,
con avaricia casi,
los arduos pormenores de este instante,
de esta habitación que da al recuerdo,
que da a la lluvia, que da a tu nombre
siempre, y al olvido. (Lamillar 50-51)

Culturalist allusions do not overwhelm the poem, as so often occurs with the *novísimos*. Rather, the passing mention of Rilke near the beginning of the poem serves to legitimize the poet’s discourse, to certify its lyrical character. Why Rilke? Perhaps because he is one of the last great poets in the European tradition who unapologetically celebrates the poet’s Orphic power. Since Rilke is simply the “poet” by antonomasia (“Rilke el poeta” as Blanca Andreu puts it),³ it does not much matter which of his works the speaker and his companion are reading. The allusion, like the mention of jazz, is generic. Another Lamillar poem, “Jazz en el alcázar,” recycles this musical tradition, converting it into cultural *kitsch*. It begins, “Los amigos te dicen: jazz de los años veinte” and concludes by

³This phrase occurs as a leitmotif in *De una niña de provincias* (13, 33, 37, etc.). An ungenerous assessment of Andreu’s work would view it as surrealist *kitsch*, a pastiche of Lorca and other writers. In contrast to many male writers of her generation, however, her voice is relatively strong and fresh.

evoking “cualquier tema de Ellington, / aplausos y la noche y los amigos” (Lamillar 23). Again, the speaker does not care which of Duke Ellington’s thousands of compositions he is hearing, or that Ellington’s music is more characteristic of the 1930s than of the 1920s. The cultural reference remains deliberately unspecified.

In spite of its essentially second-hand aesthetics, Lamillar’s poetry is elegant and even subtle in its deployment of lyric conventions. As García Martín comments, Lamillar’s work strikes “un grato tono menor” (38). In “Amor en claroscuro” the motif of the awakening woman calls to mind poems by Pedro Salinas and Claudio Rodríguez. Stylistically, the poem shows a mastery of rhetorical effects: note the adjective-noun-adjective combination (“embriadoras sombras enemigas”) and the climactic anaphora, modulated by enjambment, with which it concludes. The genuine subtlety of this poem, however, results from its play with temporal perspective. Writing from the present, the poet, like don Quijote leaving on his first sally, imagines the literary re-creation that will occur, “cuando el recuerdo nos lo exija.” This retrospective glance, however, is anticipated in the poem at hand, which has prematurely converted the timeless lyric moment into a memory. This poem thus illustrates Lamillar’s view of poetry as a way of living twice, once in life and a second time in its poetic simulacrum:

Concibo la poesía como una manera de rescatar el instante, de construir otra realidad. El tiempo detenido gracias a unas palabras con intensidad y tensión distintas a las del lenguaje común, gracias a un mundo personal creado con algunos temas obsesivos, con imágenes y ritmos. La poesía, pues, como un medio de *vivir dos veces* (García Martín 150; original emphasis).

This conception of lyric poetry is utterly unremarkable. The practice of including such *poéticas* in anthologies implies that each poet will possess an original approach to his or her art. (The custom began with Gerardo Diego’s landmark 1932 anthology.) Juan Lamillar, with all of his talent for language, is content to summarize the basic conventions of the post-romantic lyric: the poet preserves a private world, stopping time through the creation of a more intense, poetic language different from that of ordinary speech.

One mark that distinguishes the “culturalism” of the younger poets from that of the *novísimos* is the diminished density and frequency of their citations. Their literary and artistic allusions

appear less exaggerated and thus less vulnerable to parody. Some view the ebb of “Venetian” culturalism as a positive development. García Martín, for example, notes that Amalia Iglesias “rehúye las gratuitas referencias culturales” (13). With this apparent gain in subtlety, however, the younger poets often sacrifice the force that comes from specificity. The result is a generic allusiveness that preserves the traditions of Western lyric poetry, but in a flattened form. It could be argued that the ostentatious erudition of the *novísimos*, in spite of its seeming gratuitousness, offers more intellectual and aesthetic substance.⁴

Juan Manuel Bonet (Paris, 1953) exemplifies the poetry of exhaustion that is so widespread among his contemporaries:

Todo está escrito

Otro poema que no dice sino
la sensación de estar solo,
tras un muro de viejos libros, viendo
cómo otro poeta dijo lo mismo
que lo escrito esta tarde,
sobre un tiempo que creíamos
únicamente nuestro, y tan presente. (Bonet 17)

The *topos* that this lyric reworks is, appropriately enough, the impossibility of novelty: there is nothing new under the sun. Guillermo Carnero’s *Variaciones y figuras sobre un tema de La Bruyère*, one of the most significant books of the 1970s, is the most immediate precursor text. *La Bruyère*’s theme, “Tout est dit et l’on vient trop tard” (9), provides Carnero with the occasion for a linguistically self-conscious examination of the limits of poetic language. Bonet, in contrast, prefers to evoke a particular mood rather than to explore issues in the philosophy of language.

Like Lamillar’s “Amor en claroscuro,” “Todo está escrito” superimposes another time frame onto the lyric present. Lamillar’s poem emphasizes the uniqueness of the moment: “y yo anoto con calma, con minucia, / con avaricia casi, / los arduos pormenores de este instante.” His desire to live his experience twice over leads him to create a poetic simulacrum, a verbal object validated by

⁴Villena also warns of the dangers of the excessive traditionalism of younger poets, but he does not mention names (23–25). The poets in his book tend to be more self-consciously “hip” and up-to-date than those in the other recent anthologies.

the poetic tradition. In Bonet's poem, on the other hand, the repetition implicit in the conventions of the lyric genre annuls the originality of the poet's experience. As he begins to write, he realizes that the dead hand of tradition has already robbed him of the privileged moment that he would have liked to capture.

An obsession with cultural memory also characterizes the ostensibly "epic" poetry practiced by young writers such as Julio Martínez Mesanza (Madrid, 1955). This poem from *Europa* resembles the more purely "lyric" poetry of Bonet:

Retirada

Vagan grises caballos por la senda
nevada, y un anciano se detiene
y ve pasar jinetes y armas oye.
Continuamente pasan los soldados,
y otra tierra recuerda y otro tiempo.
El corazón del viejo se ensombrece
mientras las muchas sombras enumera,
y otra guerra recuerda y otros hombres.

(García Martín 143)

"Retirada" evokes a generically epic scene, one that could have occurred in any past century and in any part of Europe. As in "Todo está escrito," the present of the poem is reduced to a repetition of the past. The old man superimposes his memory of another retreat onto the one he is witnessing, but neither has any real specificity. Although the poem depicts a narrative scene rather than a solitary lyric speaker in the present, its effect is close to that of the more purely lyric poems of Bonet and Lamillar. Its vague evocation of a stereotypically epic event offers little historical or intellectual interest.

In spite of the "nueva épica," then, most Spanish poets of the 1980s have done little to question the limits of the lyric genre. The statements written for García Martín's anthology reiterate a traditional definition of lyric poetry. Andrés Trapiello's (León, 1953) is typical: "Tengo la impresión de que el poeta, mediante la poesía, parece que persigue quedar en el tiempo, permanecer, durar" (118). His self-definition is equally anachronistic: "A veces creo que mi actualidad es de no ser actual, como uno de esos oscuros personajes que en los *lieder* de Schubert, lamentándose del mundo, de sí mismos se lamentan, errabundos y a la merced de la vida" (119). In the

context of contemporary American poetry, Marjorie Perloff has argued that the post-romantic lyric of individual subjectivity has become a minor genre: postmodern poets are now exploring other, non-lyric modes of poetry. She mentions the return of narrative forms in Frank O'Hara and Ed Dorn, the resurgence of prose poetry, David Antin's improvised "talk poems," and the chance generated texts of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low. From this perspective, the minoriness of recent Spanish poets, like that of many contemporary American poets, appears to be voluntary. It results from a deliberately limited set of options that belies any claim to a more inclusive postmodern eclecticism. Many talented and literate writers continue to practice a self-consciously nostalgic poetics, deriving their aesthetic credentials from a previously accepted lyric tradition. In contrast to the general drift in postmodern literature, they insist on the primacy of the subjective self in its relation to a privileged lyric experience.

The eclipse of the avant-garde impulse has led to a change in the relation of young poets to their modernist precursors. Even the strongest voices of the decade have not been able to escape a sense of belatedness with respect to the great modernist masters. In a poem dedicated to Lorca, Luis García Montero echoes Cernuda's "A Larra, con unas violetas" with the title "A Federico, con unas violetas." He concludes with a pastiche of Cernuda's famous poem: "Hoy no puede pesar sobre esta sombra / un ramo de violetas" (García Martín 83). García Montero's gesture, of course, is deliberate, and the citation of such intertexts can, in theory, be a subtle and effective technique. In general terms, however, Spanish poets of the 1980s tend to be "weak readers" of the tradition of modern poetry, from its romantic and symbolist founders to twentieth-century masters such as Rilke and Pound, Jiménez, Cernuda, and García Lorca. The title of Jon Jauristi's recent *Diario de un poeta recién cansado* (with its play on Juan Ramón's landmark *Diario de un poeta recién casado*) expresses the mood of fatigue with which younger poets approach the work of their precursors. Modernist poets have become classics to study, revere, echo, pastiche, or parody. They are no longer live presences to be contested on equal ground.

Postmodernism has several contradictory meanings in contemporary culture. Its champions view it as a break with the conservatism implicit in modernist ideas of order (or, alternatively, as a

continuation of the avant-garde spirit of rebellion). In contrast, critics of postmodernism writing from a left-wing perspective have viewed it as a form of pastiche (or *kitsch*): "In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of an imaginary museum" (Jameson 115). Whereas the work of José Ángel Valente and many of the *novísimos* could be said to be postmodernist in the first sense, the poets of the 1980s have indeed tended to "imitate dead styles." In Spanish literary culture the term *postmodernism* has already lost a greater part of its avant-garde connotations. It has instead come to connote a vague air of contemporaneity, without any specific intellectual or aesthetic content. This dilution of the term explains how Barella is able to label the poets in her anthology "postmodernists," even as she emphasizes their conventionality.

In spite of their respect and admiration for their modernist and postmodernist precursors, then, Spanish poets of the 1980s have broken with the spirit that animates modern poetry from the historic avant-garde of the early decades of the century through the *novísimos*. They are literate and self-aware writers, but they have felt no need to call into question the nature of language, the role of the poet, or the frontiers of the lyric genre. The 1980s thus represent a waning of the intellectually rigorous self-consciousness that has defined some of the most significant Spanish poetry of the twentieth century.

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