

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 16

Issue 1 *Special Issue on Contemporary Spanish Poetry: 1939-1990*

Article 9

1-1-1992

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Recommended Citation

Ciplijauskaitė, Biruté (1992) "Recent Poetry and the Essential Word," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1295>

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Recent Poetry and the Essential Word

Abstract

Postmodern poetry resists classification in tight compartments. After the last artificially-named group of the *novisimos* in the 60s, the evolution of poetry in Spain has followed different and at times divergent paths. The *novisimos* had reacted against "social" poetry, denouncing its lack of attention to artistry, almost prosaic quality, subservience to theme, and produced elaborate creations with an emphasis on form and the exquisite and more hermetic word and subject. Obeying the law of *corsi e ricorsi*, there was a certain return in the 80s to simpler expression which, however, does not pretend to be that of the "man on the street" reflecting the historical circumstance, but rather a search for essences, for eternal values. Each poet—M.V. Atencia, Jesus Munarriz, and Luis Suñen can serve as examples of the "essential" inclination—traces his own way and creates a personal poetics. Faith in the word is their common denominator. This turn to simplicity can also be observed in the last works of such poets as Carvajal, Gimferrer and Siles, who admit, however, greater ambiguity of word and intention.

Keywords

Spanish poetry, Novismos, evolution of poetry, poetic evolution, *corsi e ricorse*, M.V. Atencia, Jesus Munarriz, Luis Suñen, word, language, Carvajal, Gimferrer, Siles

Recent Spanish Poetry and the Essential Word

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Translated by Peter Browne

Lo apretado vale en verso y en prosa más
que lo suelto, el rayo más que la nube.

The compressed is worth more in verse
and in prose than the unbound, the ray
more than the cloud.

J. R. J.

Jean François Lyotard attempts to establish a division between two terms that have been alluded to by critics frequently and with remarkable differences during the last few years, the “modern” and the “postmodern.” As examples he chooses two nearly contemporary authors. Proust would embody the “modern,” since “[he] calls forth the unrepresentable by means of language unaltered in its syntax and vocabulary,” while Joyce “allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier” (341). In the postmodern, the emphasis is on the process, on constant change and the absence of determinate form. The text is understood as an event, while stress is placed on its fluctuating quality. In accordance with the negation of the existence of a single reality or of a single text as maintained by the deconstructionists or those poets belonging to the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E group in North America, John Cage affirms that “the world, the real is not an object. It is a process” (Perloff 196). Such a view leads to skepticism and encourages linguistic structures that highlight the ludic aspect of the creative task. Some of these procedures would coincide on the surface level with what Julia Barella observes in the work of the *novísimos* who, according to her, substituted “reflection for experimentation and free play, and order

for chaotic accumulation” (7). Carlos Bousoño sees in this a widespread phenomenon of the period; he points out that these poets’ stance coincides with the position adopted by analytical philosophers such as Wittgenstein, whose theories are congruent with the post-modern (294). For her part, María Pilar Palomo underscores the importance of the text itself in the creative work of these poets, which leads to the protagonism of the word (159). It should be pointed out that for the *novísimos* this protagonism is based chiefly on the word’s capacity as raw material or as an implement rather than as living experience.

In reality the word has always been the protagonist in poetry; only the nuance of its function has varied. The symbolists sought its power of suggestion as a means of alluding to the inexpressible. The modernists valued the word for its beauty and its capacity to create images. Structuralism, on the other hand, stressed its value as a component disengaged from context. According to Marjorie Perloff, the postmodernists find just as much interest in that which surrounds the word as in the word itself: “to make contact with the *world* as well as the *word*” (181).¹

In Spain, the panorama has been quite varied during the last few years. This is confirmed by those poets who participated in the symposium *Spain Toward the 21st Century* which took place at the University of Ohio in April of 1990. When one picks up recent books at random and leafs through them, one gets the impression that, irrespective of their group affiliations or overall tendencies, a growing number of poets is no longer focusing attention on that which changes (the postmodern attitude), but rather on that which remains (the true essence). This attitude reveals the latent presence of the “transcendental illusion” or of the “nostalgia” of which Lyotard speaks in relation to the “modern.” Does this perhaps mean that the evolution of recent poetry is taking a backward turn? Apart from any consideration of a well defined tendency, the values of the poets (or better, of the poems) that I wish to examine here appear to be closer to those of the modernists according to Lyotard’s definition. Are we dealing then with an actual retrograde turn or rather with what Amparo Amorós has called “islands” which “remain on the margin of groups and confraternities”? (67) Some poets are always to be found in the vanguard; others proceed at a more measured pace and do not reject their heritage. Those who seek the essential word seem to belong to the second group.

This concern for essence is not a phenomenon limited to Spain. We also come upon such solitary figures when we survey other literatures. In France one of the pillars of the group *Sud*, Yves Broussard, specializes in brief poems, foreshortenings that capture promptly the essence of that which is perceived: essences which in their brevity contain much material for deeper reflections. Another extraordinary voice, incredibly rich in its apparent simplicity, is that of Andrée Chedid. The latter has won the following words of praise from Yves Bonnefoy: “les mots enfin éprouvés, la voix qui, grave et charmante, mène vraiment au réel. C’est comme si vos mots sans orgueil dissipaient l’habituel vacarme” (Izoard 39). Among the German poets, one could mention Reiner Kunze, who condenses his message to a minimal size, or Elisabeth Meyer-Runge (v. Ulmann), who seems to have been born to sculpture the word and endow it with polyvalence. The Lithuanian Jonas Mekas is almost a virtuoso of abbreviation, who encloses within verses of one, two, or three syllables meditations that do not renounce an affective base. Among the Italians, there are poems by Mario Ancona, Ugo Stefanutti and even the “novísimo” Antonio Porta that seem to be heading in this direction.

One has generally associated essentialism with the preferred use of nouns. This is no longer the case. In this respect the procedures of the young German poet Friederike Roth are particularly interesting. Her poems consist largely of adverbs: they allow unnamed essences to float, thus demanding greater collaboration on the part of the reader and in this manner becoming inscribed in the postmodern mode.

Amparo Amorós, observing the development of the young poetry in Spain, attempts to establish a division between two trends that should be taken into account: for the *novísimos* the major interest lay in the linguistic element; today, on the other hand, “the poem is no longer considered an autonomous and cloistered linguistic world or a self-sufficient verbal system”—beneath the word one searches for something more.² The interest in the “essentialist” authors for the unadorned word sometimes coincides with the ideals of the minimalists and those who practice the “poetry of silence” operating on the basis of suppression, synthesis, brevity, concision and elision. The difference lies in a basic attitude: the minimalists reduce verse to its essential nature because it no longer points to something beyond the written word. Those whom I call “essentialists” seek for and believe in transcendence.³

In a recent essay Enrique Molina Campos draws attention to a return to reflection and concomitantly, to concision. The purpose of the word is no longer that of carefully creating artistic niceties. According to Sánchez Zamarreño, “to write is no longer a form of diversion, but rather a way of probing towards intimacy, towards otherness and towards ultimateness” (59). It is admitted that there exists something beyond the text. Verbal expression is again only a component and not the whole; consequently it can be abbreviated. It is not a new phenomenon. García Martín rightly points out that the precursors of this trend towards condensation are José Angel Valente and Andrés Sánchez Robayna, and suggests that in the overall inclination towards abbreviated reflection there may be observed a possible influence of María Zambrano (26–27).⁴ The orientation towards philosophy emphasizes the word as a vehicle of knowledge, and at the same time of communication; it is less concerned with its ability to shine for an instant.

The instantaneous is a characteristic of this end of the century.⁵ But today an increasingly numerous group of poets is seeking not only that which changes but also that which remains. Consequently it is difficult to establish a division into generations in relation to this readjustment of perspectives: some are the same age as the *novísimos* or even older, as during the peak years of the latter they kept themselves at the margin. There are others who represent the younger group. The difference of birth dates is not always indicative of differences in attitude or orientation. In a recent study Dionisio Cañas affirms: “What matters today for the young poet is to fascinate. For this reason he mingles the false and the true, indulges in artifice, and attempts to surprise while fleeing didacticism” (53). This formulation could be seen just as well as part of the poetic technique of some *novísimos* during certain years. However, Bousoño underscores that one should not judge a poem only at the surface level: not infrequently the verses of these poets are in fact much more than a mere ludic exercise and express a much deeper frustration which is not without philosophical rooting.

In this regard it is interesting to compare statements by two poets of the same generation in order to underline this change of attitude towards the word. For Carnero, as Bousoño suggests, the word does not express an experience of reality. Rather it avails itself of the latter in order to formulate the only thing possible: “*the literary representation of the frustration of real experience*” (292):

No hay más que la palabra
al final del viaje.

There is no more than the word
at the end of the journey.

This would be more or less comparable to the positions contained in Gimferrer's books written in the 70s, in which the negation of reality is constant. Nevertheless, in a more recent text by the same poet we come across a declaration which could be interpreted in a fairly different way: "ahora la palabra . . . es existir tan sólo" ("now the word . . . is no more than to exist"; G. de la Concha and S. Zamarreño, 90). The question is no longer "to exist in only the word" but rather "the word is to exist." This would mark a return towards real experience, towards the concept of the poem as something that remains: "Was aber bleibet, stiften die Dichter" (Hölderlin). The emphasis is shifted from negation to creation. In the verses of the essentialist poets we would seem to discern clearly the nostalgia for something permanent, in spite of the fact that at the Ohio symposium the existence of nostalgia for anything at all was repeatedly denied. Reflection finds its place within the perception of time without rejecting the ephemeral, but at the same time without abolishing the possible existence of something that has existed before and will continue to do so afterwards: the primordial and inoffensive word, born before the advent of the language of Power. Rather than applying to his quest the broad term "transcendence," it would seem more exact to say that what the poet really longs for in this case is to have faith in something that does not disappear.⁶ That is, there appears that which Lyotard admonishes us against: the longing for a whole that would be more than the One, for a reconciliation of the concept and the sensory, of the transparent and communicable experience (341). With this we return to the modern.

The books of poetry that have appeared in the last decade confirm with surprising consistency a turn towards the search for essences. Even authors who previously preferred elaborate verse now condense their poetic message into very brief poems.⁷ However their word is not that of "the man on the street" against which the *novísimos* had protested: rather it would correspond to Juan Ramón Jiménez's ideal of naked poetry or to the dense and sculptured word of Jorge Guillén. It also seems to comprise something of the more

confident attitude of these two poets. One of the best examples of such use of the word among the younger poets would be Luis Suñén, whose verses would not appear to admit deconstructionist doubts:

. . . Círculo.
La alegría todo canto
consume. Nunca
el gozo sin este cielo.
Todo es y a todo vuelvo.
(*El lugar del aire* 23)

. . . Circle.
Gladness every song
consumes. Never
joy without this sky.
All is and to all I return.

Also the title of his second book, *Mundo y sí* (*World and Yes*, 1988), issues a challenge to the exhortation of Lyotard: "Let us wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences" (341).

In his panoramic vision of recent poetry Molina Campos underlines two important elements: "Above all to search for a communicative exactness . . . by heeding the nuances of each *état d'âme*" (46). That is to say, linguistic precision does not exclude the emotive; the return to the subjective does not imply a turn towards an enclosed world. The "I" acts as object and subject at the same time, while maintaining a certain distance. A confirmation of this position is to be found in the poems of *Camino de la voz* (*Way of the Voice*) by Jesús Munárriz, whose poetics appear in the following lines:

Pocas palabras. Sólo las precisas.
Materia adentro, corazón arriba,
alma adelante.
Sólo las amadas
Pocas palabras. Todas encendidas. (10)

Few words. The precise ones only.
Material within, heart up,
soul forward.

Only those loved
Few words. All of them inflamed.

The author's concern for "elaborating a poetic discourse where the *lived* and the *written* (the *legible*) flow into a common path" had already dictated the poems of *Esos tus ojos* (*Those Your Eyes*, 1981), where nevertheless condensation was still not frequent nor was there a complete faith in the word. A reading of *Camino de la voz* gives an impression of clarity and confidence (are they perhaps pretended?). Here the poems have been reduced to a minimal extension, while the verse has been stripped of all rhetoric. Now it does not express a desire for being that employs art as a possible path towards survival, but rather an affirmation of being, of joy already obtained. It makes use of intertextuality in order to produce unexpected effects. Thus in his first poem he suggests his position on life and poetry through verses that function through inversion:

Los vientos del azar y del destino
murallas, templos y palacios siegan,
versos arrastran, pulen, ciernen, siembran. (7)

The winds of chance and of destiny
Cut down ramparts, temples and palaces,
They propel, polish, sift, and sow verses.

It is impossible not to perceive in the last verse an echo of those sonnets dedicated to death by Golden Age authors. A comparison between the gradation found in the last verse of the latter and in Munárriz's poem is precisely what highlights the intention of transforming towards perpetuation. In a similar fashion, once more in a very brief poem, "El Día," the poet transforms the tradition of *carpe diem* by placing emphasis on that possessed rather than on that which shall be lost (although the eventual loss of the former is admitted).⁸

In *Camino de la voz* what predominates are short and nearly naked poems which are highly expressive for this very reason. This verse appears to be chiselled with almost greater neatness than before, and even within its brevity it achieves expressiveness by means of internal rhyme, alliteration and strategic enjambement: art has not been sacrificed in the quest for essences. What always stands out is precision, certainty, and condensation. The passage from the exterior

to the interior is constant and allows the combination of aesthetic values with ethical ones. The poet continues to incorporate fragments from the verses of other poets in order to achieve plurisignation. On the other hand, he also employs forms of popular song, in part for metapoetic purposes. There are many poems that present the process of creation in an unadorned manner. Abbreviation has not eliminated tension: affirmation is grounded on latent doubt; distanced observation and emotional reaction are combined. Modernist traits are mingled with postmodern ones.

Among those poets displaying this inclination, the longing to discover essences extends to varied phenomena. Each poet chooses the facet that he finds most compatible: an abbreviated definition of poetry, of life or of a concrete object; the synthetic transmission of a poet or a composer's style; the condensation of the most characteristic element in a work of art in a pair of verses, including the poet's own reaction or reflection; the exploration of the value of the word; microstructures that capture the gleam of a moment of life or a perceived scene, almost with *haiku* or *tanka* techniques, as in the poems of Alejandro Duque Amusco or Manuel Sánchez Chamorro; the recreation of essential popular *coplas* (songs) as in *Fábula de fuentes* (*Fable of Fountains*, 1988), by Rafael Juárez. Common to all is the adherence to only the indispensable.

Presentation tends to be unadorned, and emotion is controlled to leave free space for the receptor's reaction—in most cases that of a second grade receptor. Thus, María Victoria Atencia is capable of transmitting the essence of a famous sculpture—"The Slave" by Michelangelo—perceived through the poet's personal prism so as to elicit questions from the reader:

Para la muerte fuiste engendrado en belleza
antes de que el cincel descubriera en el mármol
tu descompuesto escorzo de aburrimiento y sueño.

(Paulina 18)

For death you were engendered in beauty
before the chisel could uncover in the marble
your altered foreshortening of boredom and sleep.

Here the poet does not question the existence or reality of the world; rather she confirms the presence of a work of art that has survived.

The eyes that behold it change, but its external essence, which conceals the internal essence (of the slave and of the sculpture), is accepted as fact. The eye of the one contemplating is that which superimposes its own interpretation on the work of art, thus prolonging it in time. In the same way, the reaction of the author of *Compás binario* to Goya's portrait of the countess of Chinchón creates a new experience. The reader receives three truths: that of the painted figure, what it meant for the painter, and the reaction of the poet. These are presented in seven lines of verse:

Por romper el silencio, mustias espigas roza
 un ángel cuando pasa sobre tus bucles jaros;
 o porque no has perdido aún—tú, la carente
 de todo—una frescura conventual y dócil.
 Desde el sillón prestado contemplas la comedia
 y, con ausentes brazos, abarcas el juguete
 de un vientre de ocasión por encargos reales. (63)

To break the silence, an angel skims parched ears of grain as he passes over your reddish curls; or since you still haven't lost—you, the one lacking all—a conventual and docile freshness. From your borrowed armchair you contemplate the comedy, and, with absent arms, you embrace a belly like an occasional plaything for real commissions.

In her presentation of a stone in *Lapidario* the technique of Clara Janés is similar: she condenses its physical description, its magic powers, its function, its significance for her. The very act of dedicating the entire book to stones lays much stress on the idea of permanence. The stone's presence joins essences rather than dispersing them:

Cuando la vida al disgregar invita
 y el aire en reverbero hace dudosas
 imagen, sensación, conocimiento,
 dispones tú los radios de certeza
 y a cohesión obligas a la bóveda
 que en humo esboza nuestro transcurrir. (63)

When life to disruption invites
And the reverberating air makes doubtful
image, sensation, knowing,
you direct the rays of certainty
and compel to cohesion the vault
which traces our transit in smoke.

Landscape is treated in a similar fashion; the poet “essentializes” it in poems like “Castilla” in *Vivir*. Like Antonio Machado or Unamuno she conjures up the essence of history while efficaciously transmitting her own reaction to it, all within the space of a mere five verses. Also Luis Suñén, contemplating the massiveness of the Balmoral castle as it stands out against the horizon, synthesizes its beauty and its meaning in very few words and affirms its continuity: “El fragmento anuda / lo que será a lo sido” (“The fragment rejoins / what will be to what has been,” *El lugar del aire* 45).

Minimalist poetry does not easily give way to affirmation. Negation seems to attack even essences, and *in nuce* conceptism prevails over emotion. The process of depuration at times almost leads to silence, as is the case in Siles’ *Música de agua* or José Carlos Cataño’s *Muerte sin ahí* (*Death Without There*), although it does not easily surrender to nothingness:

Ya no ser sino sombra,
El azar de alguien sin nostalgia.

La fe súbita en la distancia. (13)

To no longer be except silence,
The chance of someone without nostalgia.

Sudden faith in the distance.

The greatest condensation of essences is produced when one attempts to bring together in a brief poem a poet’s style and lexicon as well as his attitude towards his own life and work. This is what Antonio Carvajal calls “transubstantiation” or “eucharistic mystery” (89–90). Carlos Villareal is correct in affirming that in “the joyful mysteries” of *De un capricho celeste* (*Of a Celestial Caprice*) one attains “extremes of a nearly absolute spiritual communion” (89). Each one of the seven poems reads like a poem by the poet

represented. The voice bringing them into remembrance adds almost nothing of its own, and yet, the verses are neither Juan Ramón, nor Jorge Guillén, nor Hernández, but rather Antonio Carvajal. Is this a game of virtuosity? We would answer yes, but it is also something more: the word understood not merely as material for an artistic jewel, but also as proof of a total interpenetration, of a transmission of essences:

¡Delicia de la hora
Que, mínima, se ofrece
A los ojos y asoma
Entre los chopos leves,

Musical, entregada
Al gozo de los pechos
Que abren a la mañana
Su sensación de viento

Inhalado con ávida
Fruición de gozar más!
¿Y después? Tras el alba
Vendrá el supremo afán. (66)

Delight of the hour
Which, minimal, presents itself
To the eyes and looks out
From among the light poplar-trees,

Musical, surrendered
To the joy of the breasts
Which open up to the morning
Their sensation of wind

Inhaled with avid
Fruition of enjoying more!
And afterwards? After the dawn
Will come the supreme effort.

Although differing in technique, Siles achieves a similar concentration in “Vicente Aleixandre: Retrato” (“Vicente Aleixandre: A Portrait”), in *Columnae*, while Suñén condenses the whole of

Debussy's *oeuvre* into nine verses without omitting the listener's reaction (*Mundo y sí* 20).

Also in Pere Gimferrer, neobaroque style gives way to abbreviation and the expression of essences. The entire final portion of his *Espejo, Espacio y Apariciones* (*Mirror, Space and Appearances*), "Como un epilogo ("As an Epilogue"), is presented as an exercise in abbreviation and condensation of ultimate truths instead of the creation of opulent settings to which his reader is accustomed. The poet is now pointing towards the hidden essence that lies below the surface:

En lo frágil del aire, es violento el mármol.
En sorda combustión, da aliento a un fuego oculto:
el espíritu hendiendo la piedra. Así, nitido, un árbol,
fundido con la sombra, se vuelve claridad. (279)

In the fragility of the air, the marble is violent.
In deaf combustion, it gives breath to a hidden fire:
the spirit splitting the stone. Thus, heat, a tree,
blended with shadow, turns into clarity.

These illuminating words contain an echo of "Todo más claro" ("Everything Clearer") of Salinas. The poet pronounces these words concerning the poetic task with reference to a line by J. V. Foix, but they are applicable to his own verse: the landscape is "accurate," precise, well drawn, clear, with well-defined contours. We see it now with greater distinction, with defining clarity, more firmly delineated than the confused vision of everyday life" (*Segundo Dietario* 144). However, he wishes not only to fix essences, but also to make felt the fluidity; this procedure and attitude are summed up in "Arte poética":

Algo más que el don de síntesis:
ver en la luz el tránsito de la luz. (277)

Something more than the gift of synthesis:
to see in the light the transit of light.

In this he remains within the postmodernist spirit: he perceives everything as being in a state of motion. The texts are shortened even more in *El Vendaval* (*The Sea-Wind*): the entire section "Saló rosa"

corresponds to the quest for “the essence of these instants . . . of a concrete poetic moment” (*Segundo Dietario*, 144).

The dilemma of the existence or non-existence of the world and of things, the question of the truth or falsehood of the writing which creates other essences, and the search for the best manner of drawing closer to these essences are problems that do not admit of an easy solution. Conceptism, baroquism, and minimalism would appear to share a common destiny: that incessant struggle with the word undertaken by both modernists and postmodernists. Those poets who search for essences seem to have greater faith; those who focus on change would appear to be more skeptical. The very structure of one of the latest books of Yves Bonnefoy, *Une autre époque de l'écriture*, suggests that ambiguity will always remain as one of the essences of poetry. Throughout its pages the poet confronts various voices expressing differing opinions as to what a poem is, its reception and its recreation, in order to arrive at a conclusion as ambiguous as the book itself: “je compris que seul un dieu pourrait l'écrire, mesurant alors comme nous le mensonge de l'écriture . . . fonder dans les mots cet Etre qui s'en échappe” (50).

Notes

1. Andrew Debicki has dealt with this matter in a series of studies, several of which are mentioned in the bibliography.
2. Her observation coincides with another by García Berrio, formulated as a *desideratum* and diametrically opposed to the *desideratum* of Lyotard: “To deprive poetry, the sublime work of art, of its cosmic and transcendental dimensions, thus reducing it to the artificial imminence of its plain verbal representation, is equivalent to amputating it irremediably” (99).
3. According to a recent declaration by María Victoria Atencia, “what matters in the poem is to achieve that transcendence” (Espada Sánchez 392).
4. Philosophy frequently leads to abbreviation, as is seen in the epigrams of Antonio Machado. Luis Antonio de Villena, while making the same observation, underscores that the desire for expressive concentration practiced by the minimalist poets does not always lead to metaphysics, but only to a *simulacrum* of depth (21–22).
5. Fanny Rubio suggests that today poetry “begins to be of the instant” (52).
6. Molina Campos rightly observes that what comes to our attention in the young poets is not the presence of metaphysics, but rather of anthropophany (46).
7. There is hardly any critic who, in the course of the last two years, has not pointed out the return to traditional metrics. This may have an indirect relation to the sobriety of expression: it imposes discipline and puts a limit on verbal excess.

8. “La vida empieza hoy, con la mañana, / y tiene por delante el infinito. / A este día has llegado, es todo tuyo, / todo lo que posees, este día” (9). (“Life begins today, with the morning, / and has before it infinity. / You have attained to this day, it is entirely yours, / all you possess, this day”.)

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