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Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Spanish Poetry

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Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Spanish Poetry

Abstract

Introduction to the special issue

Keywords

contemporary Spanish poetry, Spanish poetry, poetry, introduction, history of Spanish poetry, Spanish Civil War, Francisco Franco, historical perspective

Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Spanish Poetry

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This is a good moment to assess the history of Spanish poetry of the last five decades and to study its various facets in new ways. What has hitherto been considered the major turning point of contemporary letters, the Spanish Civil War, is removed enough in time so that its impact can be reassessed: the last generation of poets now writing was born after its occurrence. A more recent event of major significance, the death of Francisco Franco (with all its attendant cultural changes), can also be viewed from some distance. Equally important, new attitudes that have emerged in the last ten years have challenged prior ways of organizing Spanish literature and given us the opportunity of suggesting new formulations. Also, a number of very distinct poetic voices that have appeared over the last decades need to be examined and placed in adequate contexts. In planning this issue, I have therefore sought out studies that would offer innovative interpretations, highlight and set in context important authors and tendencies, and indicate new ways of organizing the material (and relating Spanish poetry to international currents). I have also tried to represent leading critical voices in the study of the subject.

Historical assessments of contemporary Spanish poetry, as of all Spanish literature of the twentieth century, have been hitherto dominated by a generational approach, roughly based on the ideas of José Ortega y Gasset and, less directly, of Julius Petersen. This approach proved useful in distinguishing key figures of the 1920s (the “generation of 1927”) from preceding poets like Antonio Machado and Juan Ramón Jiménez. It was again employed to describe a later shift in attitudes and characteristics: critics spoke, and still speak, of a more philosophically-oriented “generation of 1936,” and then, again, of a “post-Civil War generation” appearing in the 1940s and reacting against the Franco dictatorship. At this point, the method raises

questions. The appearance of new generations at varying and ever more frequent intervals makes it seem arbitrary; the link between generations and specific historical events introduces a new factor into the approach; the lack of agreement among critics as to correspondences between the “36” and the “post-war” generations creates confusion. Carlos Bousoño already suggested, in 1961, that the generational method was no longer appropriate to poetry written after 1940, in which authors of different ages wrote in similar fashion. Yet it continued to be used in literary histories and anthologies, and post-1940 Spanish poetry is most often divided into that written by the “first post-war generation” (writers born between 1910 and 1925 and publishing after 1945), that of a “second post-war generation” (writers born between 1925 and 1940), that of the learned and aesthetically revolutionary “novísimos” (born after 1940 and emerging between 1966 and 1970), and even that of a generation of “postnovísimos,” which appears during the cultural changes following the death of Franco.

The problems mentioned above call for a reappraisal, which is in fact suggested by some prior studies written over the last decades. Such a reappraisal should examine the import of historical events such as the Civil War and the death of Franco in a more distanced and objective context. At the same time, it should consider with care developments in poetics and in aesthetic attitudes that have occurred in the last decades, relating them to the work of poets and groups of poets. As it does so, it should examine critically and modify, when needed, the pattern of generations, and attempt to connect the development of Spanish poetry with parallel currents in Western literature, eliminating the isolation of Spanish letters from the rest of Europe. It would be naive to expect the immediate emergence of a new and entirely satisfactory system of periodization. Yet a reappraisal must be undertaken—and I hope that this issue of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* will be one of its important steps.

The detailed studies included here focus on Spanish poetry published after 1950, when fundamental changes in poetic attitudes and styles occur, inaugurating to my mind a whole new era of “post-modernity.” But I have asked José Olivio Jiménez, the outstanding critic of contemporary Spanish poetry, to introduce the issue with an essay starting in 1939. This allows us to begin with a reassessment of the immediate post-Civil War period—a breakpoint against which later developments have always been set. By both following and

constantly critiquing a generational structure as he unfolds his history, Jiménez keeps us focused on the issue and problem of an adequate periodization.

The first part of Jiménez's essay makes clear that the turn to realism and the thematic shift to social and existential topics of the 1940s involved poets of several generations (and not just the new writers of the time). Jiménez also indicates that these innovations, important from the perspective of content, led to an impoverishment of creativity and a loss of stylistic excellence. Though his judgment picks up ideas that had been previously expressed by himself and others (Jiménez 1972, Gimferrer, Grande), its presentation here, in the context of the whole period 1939–1990, modifies the old view that a new generation of post-war writers significantly changed the course of poetry. What seemed to José María Castellet, in 1960, a fundamental and generational change in poetic expression turns out to be mainly a thematic one, affecting writers of different ages and related to historical circumstances—circumstances which, in turn, marginalized a few poets who fought against realistic tenets (mainly the “Cántico” group and the “postistas,” whose work is only now being rescued from oblivion, and who need to be connected with later developments in poetry).

José Olivio Jiménez's reassessment implies, in turn, a revised view of the importance of the next generation and period of poetry. By examining the poetics of the members of the “generation of the 1950s,” the critic underscores the importance of a new belief in poetry as a process of discovery through language, which when coupled with an interest in artistic excellence makes these new poets the initiators of a significant current of poetic expression. This perspective is further developed in Judith Nantell's study, which highlights ways in which these poets of the 1950s generation use their art to “question epistemological ground,” and move away from the much more positivistic attitude to poetry of their predecessors.

The other essay that deals with a poet of the “generation of the 1950s” (as well as with one from the prior generation) also offers a significant reassessment, calling our attention to two women poets who had been either ignored or folded into simplistic overviews. By examining the feminist bent in Angela Figuera and Francisca Aguirre, John Wilcox shows the presence of Spanish feminism well before it was generally recognized. He thus suggests one more dimension of the new directions prevalent in the 1960s; at the same time,

when read together with Sharon Keefe Ugalde's and Biruté Ciplijauskaitė's essays in this volume, his article helps us follow an important strain of women's poetry in contemporary Spain.

The view of the 1950s and 1960s as marking important poetic shifts supports recent books that have already suggested the emergence of a postmodern aesthetics in this period. Margaret Persin's examination of the stress on process rather than product in several poets, Dionisio Cañas' discussion of the phenomenological underpinnings of three major poets, and Jonathan Mayhew's study of the "duplicitous sign" in Claudio Rodríguez all indicate the presence of a fundamentally new poetic, and the originality of the verse of this time. Both Jiménez's reassessment and Nantell's study indicate how this generation—and perhaps the whole period beginning around 1955—moves from a poetics of product to one of process and inaugurates a "postmodern" era in Spanish letters (Debicki 1988). This helps modify a tendency of prior historians to classify the "second post-war" generation (and the poetry of the 1950s and early 1960s in general) as only a minor modification of earlier realistic tendencies. By situating a major breakpoint at this time, connecting it with a new poetics, and separating it from the specific event of the Civil War, such a revision also helps bring Spanish literary history into greater consonance with the commonly-established patterns of European and United States letters.

This reappraisal of the late 1950s and early 1960s suggests, in turn, that the following period of Spanish poetry, hitherto seen as absolutely revolutionary, extends to some extent prior attitudes. In their view of the poem as discovery (Jiménez) and their philosophically questioning stance (Nantell), the poets of the second post-war generation are anticipating a (postmodern?) poetics of process that will dominate the 1970s even if the style of their work prior to that decade is significantly different (see Carnero 1983).

Three essays in this issue focus on this next period and on the "novisimos," a group of highly innovative and learned poets that gained prominence in the late 1960s and became a topic of heated polemics when José Maria Castellet published an anthology of their work in 1970. The "novisimos" have gone on to become, with modifications caused by the inclusion of other authors and the diminution of some of their polemical stance, the dominant generation in Spanish poetry over the last years. In a key study, the leading poet of the group, Guillermo Carnero, offers a clear view of how these

poets used intertexts and historical *personae* to objectify meanings while avoiding confessionalism. Via a detailed commentary on a text by the other leading “novísimo” poet, Pere Gimferrer, Carnero illustrates how “culturalism,” far from implying pedantry, constitutes a new way of engendering meaning and gaining the participation of the reader. His study also confirms, to my mind, the sense that Spanish poetry has moved to a “postmodern” period in which the process of the artistic experience replaces, for poet and reader, the previous stress on the work as product or object (Debicki 1989).

The two other studies of the “novísimos” support and extend Carnero’s formulation. Drawing on her knowledge of post-structuralist criticism, Margaret Persin examines the ways in which Gimferrer “confronts all the snares of language which he views as limiting creativity.” The variety of strategems and techniques in Gimferrer’s *Los espejos* produces a fundamental questioning of language as a closed system, and confirms the presence of a new poetics of process, while highlighting the creativity of this poet’s art. And in an analysis of a recent book of Carnero’s poems, Ignacio-Javier López shows how the poet, while continuing to use language artistically and self-consciously and to draw on cultural allusions, brings his work “nearer to human life”—connecting a “culturalist” vision to the new perspective of the 1980s.

Taken together, these three studies confirm the view of the “novísimos” emerging from José Olivio Jiménez’s essay. They illustrate the techniques that Jiménez mentions in his overall characterization and make clear their value. More important, they suggest that the “novísimos’” renewed interest in poets of the 1920s (Guillén, Cernuda, Elliot, Pound) and their rejection of the post-Civil War social writing were part of an impulse to relate art to immediate human experience, and not an escape from such experience. In that sense, the “novísimos” can be seen as turning back to the great poets of modernity in their efforts to construct a basis for their postmodern art.

The reader of the Carnero and Persin essays will note an apparent conflict between their assessment of the “novísimos”: where the former stresses how literary allusion embodies the poet’s vision, the latter highlights a questioning and a denial of permanent meanings. I see them coming together, however, in stressing the “novísimos’” belief in art and artistic language as a means of confronting the basic issues and conflicts of life in fundamental ways, transcending simple messages, anecdotes, or confessions, and

carrying further the process of artistic deepening initiated by the previous generation.

These studies relate to, and confirm, an important study of Carnero's work by Carlos Bousoño included in his book *Poesía postcontemporánea* (1984), which posits a new view of reality and art and links it to the "novisimos" revolutionary stance with respect to language. They also support an excellent evaluation of the "novisimos" style by García de la Concha (1986), which points out the innovations introduced by a neo-baroque style, various kinds of references, *collage*, etc., as well as important (but often ignored) declarations by Gimferrer regarding the seriousness of his use of allusions to popular culture (Gimferrer 1978, 1979), and Genaro Talens' comments on the relation of this poetry to the literary-cultural-social climate around it. Clearly, these poets carry the already-emerging poetics of process to its practical conclusion and create a new style to do so successfully. By relating the vision and style of the "novisimos" to specific poems, procedures, and results, the three studies included in this issue demystify the nature of their work, and correct the erroneous tendency of some critics to view these poets as snobbish obscurantists.

In discussing a period beginning around 1975, José Olivio Jiménez wisely modifies a generational perspective, and comments on ways in which poets of diverse ages transcend the combative posture (and even divisiveness) previously brought in by the "novisimos." Noting the increasingly artistic and linguistically conscious nature of new works by the members of the "generation of the 1950s" on the one hand, and the decreasing self-marginalization of the "novisimos" on the other, he traces a confluence around an art at once relevant and artistic, which also incorporates new poets emerging at the time. (His comments on the "novisimos" are well-supported by López's essay on Carnero, mentioned above; see also Debicki 1990.) Jiménez goes on to discuss the young poets coming to the fore after 1975, noting how they incorporate personal experience into poetry and make use of everyday idiom. Finding it no longer necessary to use brilliant language and a "cultural disguise of the poetic subject," they produce verse that is both artful and accessible, overcoming the polemic of the previous decade. Jiménez also comments on the general richness and variety of poetic expression at this time, linking it to a decentralization of cultural centers in Spain and the appearance of a variety of regional groups, magazines, and

publishing houses. It confirms the difficulty of defining, as yet, the major voices of the time, and the importance of reading many collections and anthologies to get a sense of the period.

José Olivio Jiménez's overview of this most recent period is supported and expanded by the last two studies in this collection. In one of them Biruté Ciplijauskaitė studies what is perhaps the most dominant of several poetic strands, a concentration on simplicity, on an essential (at times minimalist) language. She links this tendency with a search for essences amidst the ambiguities of a complex world, while making clear, through detailed commentary, the originality and value of the works involved. In the other essay, Sharon Keefe Ugalde examines how prominent Spanish women poets of the 1980s treat traditional female figures in a new way, subverting conventional male-centered portrayals and opening the way for a feminist perspective. Her study underscores the importance and innovativeness of poetry written by women in this period—and written by authors of different ages (and hence generations).

The growing importance of, and attention to, poetry written by women in the Spain of the last decade deserves further thought. It is of course a sign of one of the most notable changes in this very rapidly changed society; more importantly, to my mind, it is a signal of the complexity and ambiguity with which talented women have perceived their situations. Spanish women poets have been writing in varying styles and from widely varying perspectives; they have published works ranging from classical (Amparo Amorós) to the parodic and shocking (Ana Rossetti) to the complexly reflective (Fanny Rubio). The enormous originality and vitality of their verse points to the presence of exceptionally talented writers on the one hand, and of a challenging and conflictive setting that elicits poetic commentary on the other. (All facets of this issue are apparent in the anthology *Las diosas blancas*, in which a wealth of excellent women's verse is very well selected—and introduced in patronizing fashion by a male anthologist!,—and also in a special collection entitled *Litoral femenino*.)

Ugalde's essay and Jiménez's comments on the most recent Spanish poetry make us question anew the whole generational method. Looking back over the history of Spanish poetry after 1939, it seems as though generational groupings are least useful at moments of historical and social change. We saw how, in the immediate post-Civil War period, poets of very different ages came together to produce

social and existential verse, written in a direct idiom, and largely in response to the early Franco regime. Then again, after 1975, against the backdrop of the death of Franco and the social and artistic changes triggered by the end of censorship and the emergence of a new society, poets of different ages produce more similar works. Generational concepts, on the other hand, seem at least somewhat useful when a group of young writers appears and asserts a new poetic program in the face of a static social situation (and, perhaps, a stagnant artistic scene). The best example might be the irruption of the first “novisimos” in the late 1960s, though one might also think of the appearance of the “generation of the 1950s.” All this, to my mind, puts the whole generational method in question: if it is only applicable at select moments, it cannot serve as an overriding scheme of literary periodization.

This problem and its possible solutions are discussed, intelligently and innovatively, in the last section of José Olivio Jiménez’ study. The critic indicates how a fundamental multi-volume study by Victor Garcia de la Concha adopts a method of literary periods that avoids the pitfall of generational groupings, and indicates how such a method also emerges from the ways in which his own study has first used and then modified a generational one. He also reviews recent efforts to create new schemes based on “modernity” and “post-modernity” (Cañas, Debicki), sets them in context of other formulations, notably Bousoño’s earlier notion of the “postcontemporary,” and offers additional and original reasons for its consideration.

This special issue is addressed to a fairly wide range of readers. As the comments above make clear, I have tried to include studies that would come together to give the specialist an innovative total vision of contemporary Spanish poetry, as well as a variety of original analyses. But those of us collaborating in this venture have also tried to make our insights accessible and appealing to specialists in other literatures, so as to help them see the main features and values of our field of study. We hope, in this fashion, to convey to our colleagues in allied disciplines not only our discoveries and our insights, but also our sense of admiration in the face of an extraordinarily rich *corpus* of poetry.

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