



Rosa Benéitez Andrés  
*José-Miguel Ullán.*  
*Por una estética de lo inestable*

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Although mainly focusing on the oeuvre of a single author, the Spanish poet José-Miguel Ullán (1944-2009), the scope of the monographic essay by Rosa Benéitez Andrés, *José-Miguel Ullán. Por una estética de lo inestable*, extends well beyond her specific case study, involving a thoughtful and dynamic reconsideration of some major issues in literary theory and, in particular, in the analysis of twentieth century poetry. This is also one of Benéitez Andrés' explicit goals (16), in line with her own education, research and professorship in the fields of "Estética y Teoría de las Artes" ('Aesthetics and Art Theory').

At the same time, such an aim cannot be perhaps achieved without resorting to the close reading of Ullán's works. As it is often recalled in the essay, in fact, José-Miguel Ullán's poetry – ranging from *El jornal* (1965) to *Agrafismos* (2008) and *Lámparas* (2010) – cannot be easily classified in the history of Spanish and European literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Avoiding the binary opposition between formalism and realism which characterizes such a literary history, as well as other European traditions (24-25), Ullán requires the identification of a "third space", in line with the general "instability" (16) which Benéitez Andrés uses as an overall description of his poetics. A similar position – as Benéitez Andrés aptly recalls (p. 46) – can be found in other poets of his time, including Francisco Pino, Aníbal Núñez and José Ángel Valente – reflecting, thus, the instability of the Spanish socio-



economic and political context in the age of transition to democracy, after Franco's dictatorship.

While Benítez Andrés grounds her analysis on this specific point (31), she mainly focuses on the cultural and literary debate surrounding those poets, showing that the traditional categories of literary criticism cannot be easily adopted in the case of Ullán. In this regard, Ullán's polemic attitude towards Josep María Castellet's 1970 anthology of the "novísimos" – echoing the eponymous Italian anthology, issued in 1961 – may be quite notorious in the Spanish literary tradition; in view of this, Benítez Andrés provides us not only with the history of this debate, but also with a well-informed theoretical account (41-47) of the difference between the concept of "nuevo" ('new') and the specific declination chosen and somehow imposed, both in Spain and in Italy, by the "novísimos"/"novissimi".

Even more interesting is the analysis of Ullán's poetry in the light of other two categories – "poesía social" and "poesía del silencio" – leading, in Benítez Andrés' essay, to a double deconstructive take: her critique concerns both the reductive understanding of engagement, as it is widespread in the analysis of European twentieth-century poetry, and the all-comprehensive ambition of the category of "poesía del silencio", which could be stretched to the point of including in the lot authors which are as diverse as Mallarmé and Celan (47).

Ullán's peculiar position, on the other hand, can be fully understood only by eschewing binary oppositions and reductive definitions, as Miguel Casado, among others, had already suggested in his work, especially in his introductions to Ullán's poetry collections (1994, 2008). While Benítez Andrés clearly draws on Casado's position, her contribution specifically stresses the importance of Ullán's experiences in Paris and in Mexico – as well as his longstanding interest for visual poetry, whose Spanish tradition still needs a closer look (acknowledging the work by groups such as N. O. or La Cooperativa de Producción Artística y Artesana and authors/artists such as Isidoro Valcárcel Medina) – and the importance of comparing Ullán to another "irregular" and "unstable" Spanish author such as José Ángel Valente. As it concerns the latter, a recent essay by a young Italian scholar –

Stefano Pradel's *Vertigo de las cenizas: Éstetica del fragmento en José Ángel Valente* (Pre-Textos, 2019; XVIII Premio Gerardo Diego de Investigación Literaria) – deserves to be mentioned, because both his essay and the one by Benítez Andrés could contribute to the reframing of the comparative analysis of Italian and Spanish poetry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, exceeding, thus, the limits of the already canonical comparison of the Italian *Novissimi* and the Spanish *Novísimos*.

Another interesting contact between the two literary and critical traditions can be found in Paolo Giovannetti's *La poesia italiana degli anni Duemila* (Carocci, 2017), whose categories of "installation poetry" and "performative poetry" could be equally destabilized in the analysis of Ullán's work. That is what Benítez Andrés, without directly quoting from Giovannetti, attempts to do in the second chapter of her book (57-132), where she argues that the aesthetical experience has been often associated with the "hegemony of the visual" (p. 58), but sound and hearing need to be analysed as well in the same context and with the same dignity. In order to do this, criticizing this "ocularcentrism" of literary and art criticism, she convincingly resorts to Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993) – going back, thus, to the work of an American philosopher whose other major contributions include, for example, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (1984). While this can be undoubtedly taken as the proof of Benítez Andrés' double attachment to philosophical theory and aesthetics within a decidedly materialist perspective, her reflections are also well integrated by the reference to Raymond Murray Schafer's work on the concept of "soundscape" – starting perhaps with his eponymous and ground-breaking essay published in 1968. Such a well-informed perspective also entails a reconsideration of the classical understanding of performativity, leading to a very interesting comparison of Walter Ong's and Eric Havelock's positions (72-74), which may also work as a *caveat* for many contemporary works in the field of Performance Studies (usually taking "performativity" as an all-comprehensive and trans-historical category, instead of looking at its material specificities).

The third chapter (133-182) offers an in-depth analysis of irony, which is another distinctive element of Ullán's style. Initially, Benítez Andrés' focus on the conception of irony in the classical Greek-Latin antiquity might appear to be misleading when applied to a twentieth-century author (138-149), but such an approach is immediately legitimated and completed by further reference to irony in the *Frühromantik* aesthetics and, in particular, to Schlegel (149-154). If Ullán's style appears to be based on such a longstanding tradition, the "semantic opening" hereafter described as a peculiarity of his oeuvre also has its clear political and cultural consequences, showing how the cultural and political conflicts in Spain in the second half of the twentieth century were, for Ullán, hardly reconcilable.

Such a conclusion goes hand in hand with the focus of the fourth chapter (183-236) on ideology, where Benítez Andrés diligently recollects all the possible meanings of such a polysemic concept, eventually choosing Terry Eagleton's interpretation, and favouring, thus, a materialist and Marxist, or post-Marxist, approach over the idealistic or deconstructionist ones. Given Ullán's French imprinting, however, she also recalls the importance of the "pleasure of the text", evoking Roland Barthes, Philippe Sollers and the *Tel Quel* group. Once again, an author privileging instability in his poetics cannot exclusively focus on the critique of false consciousness, which often implies a sort of superiority on the side of the writer; on the contrary, he is actively and convincingly engaged in the continuous re-opening of the ideological struggle.

The book ends with an analysis of the late "a-graphic" works by Ullán, whose consonance with recent works in the field of "asemic writing" by Italian poets such as Marco Giovenale may offer another possible starting point for a comparison between Spanish, Italian and possibly other literary traditions. Ullán's poetics of instability, after all, is still productive and on a dynamically comparative basis.

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