

POETRY OF EXPERIENCE: RISE TO LITERARY HEGEMONY

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I mean to enjoy
in my innermost being all that is offered to
mankind,
to seize the highest and the lowest,
to mix all kinds of good and evil,
and thus expand my Self till it includes
the Spirit of all men.

– Goethe Faust (1808)

1. From La otra sentimentalidad to Cultural Prominence

Esta es, sin duda, la poética que cuenta hoy con más cultivadores en la lírica española. Es también la corriente que más claramente ha roto con la promoción anterior al apostar por la historicidad y temporalidad de la poesía, reivindicar la cotidianidad y reevaluar la métrica tradicional y la concepción del poema como discurso memorable en busca de un público más amplio para la poesía.”

(García- Posada qtd. in *Sobre la poesía*)

What Miguel García-Posada is alluding to is the aesthetic and ideology¹ of a key poetic group in contemporary Spanish history commonly referred to as “the poetry of experience” and whose purported goal was

¹ Althusser in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1970) constitutes ideology as: “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (157).

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“to achieve official status as a literary “generation” (Mayhew *Twilight* 58). However, before the poetry of experience would achieve any official recognition or status as a literary generation, and what that mode of centralization implies for this investigation, one must initially look to their period of germination, growth, stability and fall from grace. A suitable starting point can be considered in 1982, which witnessed the redaction and ratification of the literary and poetic manifesto *La otra sentimentalidad* by a group of poets based in Granada. Led by Luis García Montero, the manifesto introduced a new poetic- aesthetic movement which was founded on an experiential realism (both intimate and relativistic) and where individual verses became the direct confessions of the subject-poet. García Montero proposed a tripartite approach for this type of poetry: utility, normalcy and traditional aesthetics. The elaboration of these characteristics would, according to Montero, appeal to the general public:

Si queremos que la gente se siente interesada por la poesía, es necesario que la poesía diga cosas, maneje signos, nombre realidades capaces de interesar a la gente, es decir, que le hable de sus experiencias posibles y de sus preocupaciones.

(*Confesiones* 236).

Under the auspice of this proposed aesthetic style, the poets of experience managed to sweep away the avant-garde and dominant *novísimos* (or, largely, the “Generation of 68”) by way of a metaphorical cultural coup which rang with a resounding message: their goal was to conquer the hegemonic center of the Spanish poetic field.² Through ingenious socio-cultural position takings and the

² Only much later would a conclusion be posited that the poets of experience, to some degree, desired “to become canonized as the official Spanish poets of the

acquisition of immanent sources of symbolic capital, the “poets of experience” would quickly establish themselves as the status quo of cultural-poetic production by the mid to late 1980s. History and literary criticism have both proven that the hegemonic campaign of the poets of experience was successful, first by overcoming the previous hierarchy, and then superimposing themselves onto the poetic Parnassus of the late 20th century Spanish literary field; a reality that has been proven and documented to endure until the rise of counter-hegemonic movements in the twilight of the 21st century.

Originally not known by the name of “poetry of experience”, the group’s start was marked by the publication of the above mentioned manifesto *La otra sentimentalidad* by a group of poets affiliated with the University of Granada, including García Montero, Javier Egea, Alvaro Salvador and Mariano Maresca. Due to the position takings and maneuvers within the University of Granada’s political and cultural power systems by their mutual mentor Professor Juan Carlos Rodríguez, their manifesto was deemed fit to be included in the impactful collection *Los pliegos de barataria* (1983), headed then by Antonio Sánchez Trigueros. Following this fortuitous event, the manifesto of *La otra sentimentalidad* quickly gained notoriety and was subsequently published in the highly influential newspaper *El país* on January 8, 1983; an act that quickly transformed *La otra sentimentalidad* into a cultural label (Morante 26) and catapulted its poets into favor within the public and academic spheres of influence. This social dissemination would quickly catch the probing eyes of the Spanish literary critics, chiefly Aurora de Albornoz, Emilio Miró and Enrique Molina Campos, who not only publish favorable articles on the

period.” (Mayhew *Twilight* 51).

fledgling group but also edit the first anthology which would first dub them “una nueva generación” (Sartor 41).

What Luis García Montero et.al. propose in *La otra sentimentalidad* is a kind of romantic neo-confessionalism and intimate sentimentality,³ formulated through an evocation of the immortal becquerian verses from Rima XXI: “¿Y tú me lo preguntas? Poesía soy yo.” (“And you are to ask me? I am poetry.”) (Montero *La otra sentimentalidad* 7). In consequence of this evocation, the manifesto is a call to arms for an aesthetic of experiential realism, intimate and relativistic, where the verses function as a “confesión directa de los agobiados sentimientos, expresión literal de las esencias más ocultas del sujeto.” (Montero *La otra sentimentalidad* 7). García Montero and his poetic affiliates aimed to created “another” sentimentality (that is: new, different, revolutionary, etc.) which they expressed to be a unique approach to the Spanish poetic tradition of Garcilaso⁴ through Gil de Biedma. In this case, echoing certain tendencies of this forerunner poetry, the poetry of *La otra sentimentalidad* would be the setting for the poetic “I” –a poet’s personal avatar or metaphorical *doppelganger*;

³ According to Geis, the poets of *La otra sentimentalidad* (later known as the poets of experience) are interested in the literary and aesthetic ruptures and rebellions of the Romantics and Modernists, since these broke with the logocentrism of religion, philosophy and other dogmatic ideologies, opening the way for them to be freely expressive of “their own feelings and experiences through which they leave their personal mark on the cultural tradition that they inherited. Personal emotions and experiences now fill the void that in the past was occupied by transcendental truths” (699).

⁴ In *La otra sentimentalidad*, the poets of experience identify Garcilaso de la Vega as the first Spanish poet in their tradition: “Dentro de la literatura española fue Garcilaso el primero que hizo de su intimidad una aventura definitiva.” (7).

Romper la identificación con la sensibilidad que hemos heredado significa también participar en el intento de construir una sentimentalidad distinta, libre de prejuicios, exterior a la disciplina burguesa de la vida. (...) Porque el futuro no está en los trajes espaciales ni en los milagros mágicos de la ficción científica, sino en la fórmula que acabe con nuestras propias miserias. Este cansado mundo finisecular necesita otra sentimentalidad distinta con la que abordar la vida. Y en este sentido la ternura puede ser también una forma de rebeldía. (Montero *La otra sentimentalidad* 8)⁵

In the wake of *La otra sentimentalidad*, several other key manifestos showcase an expression of this “new” or “derivative” poetic aesthetic of realist intimacy, among them Alvaro Salvador’s treatise *De la nueva sentimentalidad a la otra sentimentalidad* (“From the other new sentimentality sentimentality”) (1983) and the poética inscribed within the verses of Javier Egea. In his text, Salvador alludes to the literary tradition of Antonio Machado –who is also briefly in Montero’s *La otra sentimentalidad*– and the discourse of “sentiment” or “feeling” that is pronounced by Machado’s apocryphal author, Juan de Mairena. In this context, the sentiment-signifiers expressed by the poet are in a constant state flux, differing from age to age, but are always invariably tied to a particular historical moment in space-time that is reflected

⁵ Some time later, in a 1997 interview entitled “Una poética para seres normales”, García Montero recounts the ideology of his burgeoning poetic sensibility: “Es y fue una meditación sobre la poesía realizada por un grupo de poetas unidos por la militancia antifranquista, la formación intelectual marxista y el gusto por una poesía que equilibrara la individualidad y la realidad. Las opiniones de Machado sobre la sentimentalidad, tan cercanas al carácter ideológico de la intimidad, nos permitieron buscar el compromiso histórico sin renunciar al conocimiento de nuestra sentimentalidad en la tradición algunos poetas del 27 y de la posguerra” (qtd. Morante 23-24).

through their works; “los sentimientos como algo “históricamente fechado”, es decir, los sentimientos como producto de un horizonte ideológico determinado” (Egea 21). Echoing the sevillian poet, Salvador constructs an extensive list of influences and intertextualities that purportedly saturate the poetry of the other sentimentality: the theories of Freud, Bertolt Brecht and Antonio Gramsci and the poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Rafael Alberti, Cesare Pavese and Jaime Gil de Biedma. Around the same time, Javier Egea authored a sonnet entitled “Poética”, which begins with an epigraph by Juan Ramón Jiménez and then quickly becomes an introduction and mouthpiece manifesto to the artistic endeavors of the group known by their “other” sentimentality: “Porque a pesar de todo nos hicimos amigos / y me mantengo firme gracias a ti, poesía, / pequeño pueblo en armas contra la soledad.” (Egea 70). In the same year, Egea also published *Paseo de los Tristes* (1982) in which his poem “Otro romanticismo” once again bastioned “las ideas de la otra sentimentalidad” (Aguilera 812).

Similarly to how the so-called generation of ‘27 pay homage to Luis de Góngora, and the generation of ‘98 to Mariano José de Larra, the poets of the other sentimentality tribute their own precursor poet: Rafael Alberti. Having returned from exile only a few years prior in the late 1970s, it is Alberti (who by this point was already revered and “canonical” in some Spanish literary circles) who directs the young poets from Granada towards the recovery and reengagement of realism and social experience that they would come to share with the “poetas de medio siglo”, including: Jaime Gil de Biedma, Claudio Rodríguez, Francisco Brines, Gabriel Ferrater, José Ángel Valente and Ángel González. The poets of this list “tended to merge biography and poetry” (Gies 698) –in this way coinciding with the ideas laid out in the manifesto of the other sentimentality–, a trait especially evident in the poetry of Gil de Biedma, among others. Another commonality these preceding poets share is their admiration of the romantic and modernist

British poets who later were to form part of a study of Robert Langbaum entitled the Poetry of Experience: *The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (1957) (Gies 698).

According to Mayhew (*The Twilight* 34), Pérez Parejo (*El monólogo dramático*),⁶ and even literary supplements such as the *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature* (2004), the now iconic title of “poetry of experience” is applied to the poetry of the other sentimentality *a posteriori*. The main reason for this nominal metamorphosis from *la otra sentimentalidad* to the poetry of experience is due to a critical link that thematically and aesthetically ties the poetry of experience to the very same romantic and post-romantic English poetry that Langbaum details in the *Poetry of Experience*;⁷ i.e. the application of the rhetorical device or literary trope known as the dramatic monologue in which the “I” poet –lyrical voice

⁶ It should be noted here that the nickname “poetry of experience” does not signify that this is the only other poetic group that has been able to employ the concept of the dramatic monologue that was so common place in the English poetry of experience, in fact, the *novísimos* and even some of the poets of the generation of 1950’s also successfully applied that same concept to their verses: “Desde luego, el uso de esa simulación ficticia que el monólogo dramático en la lírica no es un hallazgo de esta generación.” (Pérez Parejo).

⁷ It has also been written that, as José Luis Bellón Aguilera traces in *Todo modo: Hechos y palabras en la poesía de la experiencia* (2007), the original group that comprised the *La otra sentimentalidad* officially dismantled in 1985. Following this break, the members rallied themselves around the new idea of their verses as embodying the “poetry of experience” that was portrayed in the work of Langbaum and, in turn, made a decision to leave behind the unnecessarily abstract poetic devices that had been detailed in their original 1982 manifesto. According to Aguilera, the goal of this evolution was to allow their poetry acquire more symbolic power and thus allowing them to reach new cultural heights in a competitive war for elysium.

or poetic speaker— expresses an experiential immediacy in the stead of analytical reflection (in the original context, the rupture of enlightenment empiricism into romanticist sentimentality). More precisely, the stylistic technique that Langbaum elucidates through this Victorian English poetry relies on the creation of a “character” (herein objective correlate) that is transubstantiated from fiction or history and functions as the lyrical subject —“I”— within the structure of the poem. It is through this created/“fictional” character that the author is, in a Freudian sense, able to sublimate and express their experiences, emotions or desires through linguistic signs; “es decir, una instancia o entidad distinta del autor (situación, objeto o persona) que hable en la persona.” (Pérez Parejo). Langbaum entitles this character as the “historical analog” (a poet-simulacrum) through which the poet’s expression of thoughts/feelings are dramatized and dedramatized (Pérez Parejo),⁸ in this way also doubling as a tool of literary distancing. By employing the historical analog in their unique modern poetic social context and realist mode of expression, the goal of the poets of experience/other sentimentality can be accomplished: that is, a “novel” way of expressing the intimate sentimentality of the objective correlate throughout poetic verse (a lofty goal that is not always thoroughly achieved).

In order to better comprehend how the Spanish poets of

⁸ Pérez Parejo explains how the poet achieves a dramatization of their emotions, followed by the de-dramatization, thereby eluding the pathos of the “I” subject: “dramatizar en cuanto que se trasladan los sentimientos a las tablas de la ficción, al escenario de un personaje; dedramatizar en el sentido de que, al no aparecer el yo patético (de pathos), se atenúa la identificación con el autor y con ello se rebaja la tensión, los escrúpulos y hasta el morbo para pasar a tener la posibilidad de generar asombrosas connotaciones” (Pérez Parejo).

experience utilize the dramatic monologue and objective correlate within their texts, even before the explicit involvement of Langbaum's theories, one need not look further than the verses of Montero's early work *El jardín extranjero* (1983). The poems of *El jardín* rather unknowingly incorporate the "yo ficcional" (Morante 23) of the historic-fictive objective correlate; the metamorphosis of authorial voice to a first person fictional character is allegedly made apparent from verse to verse (Pérez Parejo). Beginning opening poem *El arte militar*, the militant father figure reminds the lyrical "I" about the hardships endured during the Franco regime; in "Paseo marítimo", the child's eyes serve as a direct witness to the postwar Granada of a young poet, full of evocative Proustian memories (sounds, smells, etc.); in "Sonata triste para la luna de Granada" the objective correlative comes in the form of the symbolist poet Paul Verlaine who, according to the caption, chants about the loneliness and poverty of the eponymous city in decades past; and finally, in the series of poems entitled *A Federico con unas violetas*, the historical analog is the vanguardista poet Federico García Lorca, through which the lyrical voice transmutes its own emotions and frustrations (by way of an uncannily resonant trip to New York, time at a student residence in Madrid, etc.). However, it is surprisingly difficult to corral a distinct or verifiable objective correlate and its relative function within the operating systems of the poetry of experience, because if the creator does not take apt precautions, the autobiographical character in situ can be paradoxically situated in opposition to the intended analog/"other". This is a common occurrence in the poetry of experience —"el sujeto lírico de la Poesía de la experiencia parece establecer de nuevo un pacto autobiográfico con el autor, precisamente de lo que se aleja el monólogo dramático." (Pérez Pajero)—, and punctuates the inspired upheaval of the aesthetic tradition

portrayed by Langbuaam (thus, another sentimentality⁹).

The Spanish “poetry of experience” has some generally agreed upon characteristics that can be recomposed from analyzing a cross section of its generative poetry: 1. Sharing of quotidian, slice-of-life experiences, 2. Addressing self-referential emotions through the vessel of the lyrical “I”, 3. Reflecting on and demonstrating fragments of a personal biography (either real or fictional), and 4. Enveloping their verses in the realistic aesthetic of poets of the generation of the 1950s and before. Other features and general characteristics shared by the poets of experience (although it is unrealistic to assume that these can serve for all poets under their flag, in every possible historical moment), has been agglutinated by Julia Barella: return to classical meters and rhyme, the rehabilitation of the epic, the introduction of humor, irony, parody, and the choice of the urban space and urban issues as sources of inspiration (17). Additionally, María Paz Moreno highlights other features: a return to the anecdote, the use of simple/vernacular language and an understanding of the poet as a “persona normal” (76). This poetry of tradition, of realism, and of quotidian “normalcy”,

(...) implicará una vuelta sobre patrones métricos y estróficos tradicionales, sobre formas fijas que enlazan con la poesía de

⁹ As García Montero states in the manifesto of *La otra sentimentalidad*, the goal of a new or renewed poetic aesthetic of everyday life: “Es necesario inventarla, volverla a conformar en la memoria. [...] Romper la identificación con la sensibilidad que hemos heredado significa también participar en el intento de construir una sentimentalidad distinta, libre de prejuicios, exterior a la disciplina burguesa de la vida. [...] Y no importa que los poemas sean de tema político, personal o erótico, si la política, la subjetividad o el erotismo se piensan de forma diferente. [...] Este cansado mundo finisecular necesita otra sentimentalidad distinta con la que abordar la vida.” (emphasis added, 7).

posguerra y la del 50, y que permitirían establecer que la tradición se aborde desde la intertextualidad (...) la complicidad lectora, la apelación a la cotidianeidad, la escenificación urbana, la coloquialidad, etcetera, irían delimitando una poética sobre la cual la sociedad de consumo tendría tanta influencia. (Siles 161)

The end result is that the poets of experience expose their individual habitus into the creation and production of poetry, evidenced here in a few example verses; “¡Bienvenido / calor entre las sábanas / conocida presencia en duermevela / cuerpo de algunos días suficientes!” (Montero *Las flores del frío* 78).

One of Montero’s later works, *Habitaciones separadas* (1994), and can serve as a barometer and highlight a portion of the previously prescribed aesthetic tendencies of the poetry of experience. Especially evident in the individual poem “Tienda de muebles y Mujeres”, is the presentation of a biographical ontology that is made possible by the lyrical “I”, as in the verses, “Me conmueve el recuerdo / de tu piel blanca y triste” (Montero 198). Coincidentally, the lyrical “I” is also the unsung protagonist throughout many of the poems, demonstrated mainly by the use of personal pronouns. From a structural perspective, there is present the omnipresent fictional character (objective correlate) who acts as a voyager from a Homeric epic (a pseudo-Ulysses) within the interwoven narrative framework of the entire work. Moreover, there is a premeditated or preordained lack of esoteric or obscure lexicon and, instead, everyday language permeates the poems; -“Alguien abre la puerta. / Los niños corren y desaparecen.” (Montero 187). According to Castro, the entire work is likewise replete with anecdotes and allegories usurped from the realist tradition (177). Urban locales are frequented often and comprise the bulk of the text’s scenographic layer (e.g. two stark examples include Manhattan and

New York in the poem “Life vest under your seat”). Neither the creator nor the lyrical “I” occults their sentiments, as these appear in full force and range from melancholy -“Nos duele envejecer” (García Montero 187)-, to happiness -“y puedo imaginarme / mi libertad, las costas del Cantábrico, / los pasos que se alargan en la playa / o la conversación de dos amigos. ” (García Montero 204)-, and even denote a personal angst -“¿Qué pensarán de mí?” (García Montero 201). The primordial essence of the poems in *Habitaciones* qualitatively express fundamentally universal experiences (“Mujeres”, “Los viajes”, etc.) in order to finally involve and appeal to the collective consciousness of the common reader, or, “la experiencia colectiva de cualquier lector” (Castro 177).

These aesthetic characteristics, -demonstrated by the works of Montero and his followers-, are replete in the poems of *La otra sentimentalidad*/poetry of experience as it was developed and expanded in the Spanish lyrical tradition of the end of 20th century. However, in a bloomian fashion, the poetry of experience is steeped in the historical, literary and social discourse that precedes it, as it most certainly did not appear in a space- time vacuum. Historically and chronologically, the poetry of experience is diachronically situated as superseding the so-called *Novísimos* movement which flourished in 1960s and 1970s, and whose poets are gathered in the controversial anthology titled *Nueve novísimos poetas españoles* (1970) by José María Castellet. The poetry of the *novísimos* surges to life as a cultural product of the last years of Franco's regime and lasts through Spain's democratic transition period of the 1970s. Their rise to popularity is due in part to an expanding cultural openness -or *aperturismo*- that was fulminating during the end of the dictatorship, coupled with a social rebelliousness that became the

hallmark of post-dictatorship Spain.¹⁰ This historic change in national temperament was sufficient to usher in a poetic shift, especially in the Spanish youth of the so-called Generación del 68, “los jóvenes lectores y escritores de entonces se interesaron por una poesía de vanguardia que rompiera con las presiones ideológicas que llevaban años determinando los movimientos culturales” (Salas Romo 97). The aesthetics of the *novísimos* has been critically categorized as a form of dialectic rupture, or antithesis, in opposition to the “exhausted” socio-critical poetry (Aguilera 797) that had been tempered by the harsh realities of post-civil war Spain but was now, according to the young poets literally automatized. The poetry of the *novísimos* therefore characterizes a movement towards a linguistic and ideological renewal of literary epistemology,¹¹ alongside a new sociocultural era. As the poets of experience would overturn the established poetic hegemony of the 1980s and 1990s, so too did the *novísimos* inadvertently capitalize on the sociocultural turmoil and upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s to tip the balance of symbolic power in their favor. As Bourdieu states,

¹⁰ Art, and literature to be sure, is rife with a discursive agency that has the power to affect a given historical context but, reciprocally, is likewise affected by this same history as well. In regards to the *novísimos* as somehow a product of their space and times, the Hegelian expression that art is the storehouse of culture seems aptly fit.

¹¹ According to Julia Barella, the *novísimos* defied the established horizon of expectations of the era, breaking metaphorical barriers by revindicating “el decadentismo, el esteticismo, el lujoso léxico modernista, el estilo de la vanguardia, el malditismo...” (13) and “sin duda, la propuesta novísima regeneró el ambiente literario español [y] sirvieron de ayuda y de estímulo a muchos jóvenes que entonces empezaban.” (13)

It remains true that cultural producers may use the power conferred to them, above all in periods of crisis, by their capacity to produce a systematic and critical representation of the social world in order to mobilize the virtual force of the dominated and to help to subvert the established order in the field of power. (Bourdieu Rules of Art 252)

However, although time has demonstrated that the *novísimos* were an influential and, a posteriori, a cultural relevant literary force in a historical sense, for the mass Spanish public that was still accustomed to the previous socio-realist aesthetic, the avant-garde poetic approach of the *novísimo* poets fell far from the mark in regards to accommodating a more generalized sensibility. According to Barella, conservative critics and the general public alike found the brazen uniqueness of the *novísimos* to be negative on multiple accounts: it was seen a simpleminded “game” of a non-erudite youth, the loss of a centralized identity of the poet figure (a staple of the realist tradition) was seen as a clumsy and vulgar characteristic, and they rejected the sometimes obscure referencing of pop- culture icons and iconography – “arremetieron contra la difícil poesía de unos jóvenes esteticistas que incluían en largas enumeraciones referencias a unos mundos culturales que ellos desconocían.” (14). In retrospect, the poets of experience, Luis García Montero and Felipe Benítez Reyes, would go on to write about the “sacralization” of the poetic art by the *novísimos*. History has shown that literature (or science, art, philosophy, etc.) removed from conventional confines is usually met with a furrowed brow, as it can exert a socially subversive influence, and poetry of the *novísimos* is perhaps no exception.

While it has been documented that the *novísimos* flourished and enjoyed cultural recognition even despite the critical backlash they received, by the 1970s and into the 1980s, there begins a paradigmatic

shift away from the rupturist tendencies of the *novísimos* –even some of the more extreme members (d)evolve into certain classical styles–. The aesthetic pendulum returns back to the veneration and continuity of the prior poetic generation (revolving around José Ángel Valente, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Francisco Brines, Ángel González, etc.) and a new fondness develops for their more intimate and experiential poetic leit motifs which echoed the changing national Spanish zeitgeist or climate of the 1980s:

A finales de los setenta, la vuelta a la tradición es ya un hecho innegable. El repliegue hacia la intimidad y la revalorización de la memoria y de los sentimientos convierten a la poesía en un modo privilegiado de rescatar el instante, (...) experiencia biográfica y experiencia de cultura, serían inseparables en la poesía de los ochenta. En ese sentido sí puede hablarse de una relativa continuidad. (Millán 64-65).

The change in the aesthetic atmospheric composition of the Spanish zeitgeist of the 1980s (the establishment of a new democratic era), explains the canonical displacement that the current of the *novísimos* suffered at the hands of the poetry of experience and its potent heralds; “explicaba la caída novísima por la dispersión e incomprensión de sus propuestas y por la fuerza que había adquirido el retorno al clacisismo gracias a autores como Villena o Luis Alberto de Cuenca, apoyándose en el desplazamiento canónico sugerido por éste último.” (Méndez 164). While the poets of experience, such as those mentioned by Méndez, are not the sole poetic group or aesthetic to arise from the ashes of a “postnovísimo” literary field, they did manage to fill a subconscious yearning in the Spanish poetic discourse that yearned for an expression of the realistic, biographical, experiential and “every day” being. However, there was a considerable hurdle to

overcome, in that the poetry of the “other sentimentality” –in its nascence at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s– were located in the literary and cultural periphery; or what Even-Zohar denotes as the status of epigones. Indeed, the *novísimos* (alongside their recognizable “culturalismo” style) occupied then the role of hegemony, piqued the Spanish literary imagination, and thus were able to absorb most of the symbolic capital in the field; “eran el polo dominante del campo literario hispánico” (Aguilera 801). Therefore the subconscious ancillary project of the “other sentimentality”, as headed by Luis García Montero and his contemporaries, was, in a sense, a Marxist revolution against the established “elite” poetry, an attempt to uproot the center and depose the metaphorical antecedent. Their only weapon of war was the construction of a poetic aesthetic and ideology that would pierce the very heart of the *novísimos* and other avant-garde movements, and come out victorious through its own merit and sociocultural allegiances with the fields of power.

Theirs was an attempt at a cultural and literary coup –“La otra sentimentalidad (...) rezuma, casi intempestivamente, el aroma de las vanguardias: un grupo de escritores provocateurs cuestionan el polo dominante del campo literario.” (Aguilera 803)- with the clear and expressed intention of usurping the dominant position by arresting it from the vanguardias: “el mensaje, el comunicado, deja claro en su totalidad que el objetivo de su práctica poética es la ideología dominante.” (Aguilera 804). This goal of domination vs. extinction dichotomy was instinctually evident and points at Darwinian literary evolution in practice, as achieving dominance leads to the stability of an intended system; “It is only such stable systems which manage to survive, while others simply perish.” (Even-Zohar *Polysystem* 26). What followed was a carnivalesque literary rupture, wherein there was not an anti-systemic or avant-garde art form that sought to renew a centralized and stagnant discourse, but rather the reintroduction and

rebirth of a classic, realist and bourgeois tradition,¹² the return to “aesthetic conservatism in contemporary Spanish poetry” (Mayhew *Twilight* 17).

2. Legitimation, Symbolic Violence and the appearance of the other

Benefitting from over two decades of retrospection, the critics and those institutions that compose histories of Spanish literature have demonstrated that the ideological campaign of dominance from the camp of the poetry of experience had been met with staggering success. Since in the 1980s, 1990s and even into the 2000s, the affiliates of the poetry of experience climb to the summit of the poetic Parnassus; the metaphorical place of cultural hegemony of the literary-poetic field of the twilight of the 20th century.¹³ However, ascending the ladder of literary and cultural hierarchy into canonicity¹⁴ is never an easy feat, as it has required well thought out and numerous position takings (up to and including articulations at the national level) and the (re)acquisition

¹² Following Méndez, “El proceso se ha descrito como un desplazamiento del vanguardismo por el clasicismo.” (161).

¹³ Mayhew adds to this discussion: “the attempt to establish the “poetry of experience” as the “dominant” or “hegemonic” tendency of the 1980s and beyond has been successful: most anthologies devoted to the period are dominated by this school.” (58).

¹⁴ In a global sense, canonicity does not necessarily indicate “good” or “bad” literature but simply are those phenomena that are accepted as legitimate by the dominant circles, that is, “the group which governs the polysystem that ultimately determines the canonicity of a certain repertoire.” (Even-Zohar *Studies* 15). This investigation does not seek to put a negative or positive qualitative/quantitative rating to poetry, rather the text is to be judged and finally understood by the reader as Stanley Fish and his colleagues propose in the tradition of reader response.

of the limited sources of symbolic capital (in the form of anthologies, literary prizes, etc.); what happened can be seen as a conquest of Raymond William's tripartite functions of *traditions, formations and institutions*. As was previously stated, the poets of experience had the luxury of an initial link with the university apparatus (a powerful and influential ISA) which would legitimize their work from the outset; according to Aguilar, the Spanish university system during the apogee of the poets of experience was the "centro productor de legitimación cultural, en relación directa con las dinámicas de canonización de las obras literarias." (807).

It was through the influence of the professors at the University of Granada that the fledgling group managed to spread their manifesto in a newspaper of great importance (*El país*) and, in consequence, throughout Spain (an option that is mostly improbable for a grassroots or independent poetic group)¹⁵ Coupled with a well-known, appreciated realist aesthetic and their bond with renowned poets of previous generations, the poets of experience were able to attract overwhelmingly positive, and immediate, popular and critical attention. Now touting a weighty and established literary potency alongside an enticing hegemonic position in the literary field of the 1980s, many talented poets would eventually join their ranks. This act would further bolster their cultural power and would include names such as Carlos Rosales, María Ángeles Mora, Luis Muñoz, Javier Salvago, Jon Juaristi, and Felipe Benítez Reyes among many other names in Spanish

¹⁵ Aside from their dissemination through literary prizes and positive criticism, they were equally supported through publicly funded and impactful journals: "revistas "Olvidos de Granada", "La fábrica del Sur" y "Hélices" o la colección "Maillot amarillo", todas costeadas con dinero público y herméticamente cerradas a quienes estaban fuera de la oficialidad." (Palacios Guzmán 3).

poetry that would rise to prominence in part due to their link with the poetry of experience.

Furthermore, García Montero then coins the ontological core of the poetry of experience as a *poesía de normalidad* (poetry of normalcy) in what perhaps had the additional effect of appealing to a more mainstream audience –no doubt a substantial sector of the consumers of this particular poetic style–, wherein this change would in turn resonate with the soul of the proletariat everyman¹⁶ and thus “dar voz en los poemas a los explotados, hablar sobre el sufrimiento producido en nuestras vidas cotidianas por la explotación en la sociedad del mercado y el espectáculo” (Aguilar 810).¹⁷ Combining their discourse of normalcy with the fields of power, lead the poetry of experience towards hegemony, as Mayhew posits: “la poesía de la experiencia ha alcanzado la hegemonía presentando una narración de

¹⁶ It is vital to recognize that both “everyman” and even the intellectual during the height of the poets of experience was adrift in an atmosphere of stunted growth and change, that would in turn function as a boon to the group’s popularity and literary diffusion: “No son buenos momentos para los intelectuales. Aquel afán por cambiar que mostraron los universitarios en los años 70, deja paso a una juventud universitaria pasiva, resignada y acrítica. Imposible cambiar nada. Como nota predominante impera el escepticismo en todos los aspectos. Son tiempos de masificación de las universidades y de desprestigio general del profesorado. (...). Leyes como la del divorcio, la del aborto, las nuevas orientaciones de la enseñanza con la imposición de la LOGSE, descentran el país y lo que se creían valores de siempre tienden a desmoronarse ante la imposición de una cultura cada vez más desorientadora” (Guillén 13).

¹⁷ García Montero understands the poetry of experience as cultivating a real and objective message that can be decoded by the reader: “se convierte en un territorio de objetividad donde el poeta puede ordenar sus experiencias para entenderlas mejor y para exponérselas al lector. En esta peripecia artística de la objetividad cobran un valor decisivo una elaboración medida del personaje poético y el marco de la experiencia real como temperatura y telón de fondo de los poemas” (*Poeta necesario*).

normalización triunfante en consonancia con la autoimagen de la élite política española” (*Poetry, Politics and Power* 246-247). Thus, the poetry of experience became a function of Spanish societal discourse, both integral and conformed: “una poesía no enfrentada a la sociedad, sino integrada en ella, conforme” (Siles 169). As Bourdieu once again reminds, an affinity with the “general public” is critical to achieving hierarchy and dominance in a specific field:

According to the principle of external hierarchization of force in the temporally dominant regions of the field of power (and also in the economic field) - that is, according to the criterion of temporal success measured by indices of commercial success (such as print runs, the number of performances of plays, etc.) or social notoriety (such as decorations, commissions, etc.) pre-eminence belongs to artists (etc.) who are known and recognized by the ‘general public’.

(Bourdieu *Rules of Art* 217).

It was due to this same poetic link and resonance the poetry of experience held with the general population that gave this group the social clout to enlist (and be enlisted by) various factions of the Spanish government –perhaps one of the most potent fields of power to be allied with–. Under the command of Prime Minister José María Aznar beginning in 1996,¹⁸ the appointment of poets to positions of authority contributed considerable symbolic and economic capital and was a

¹⁸ It has also been argued that even before this, the poetry (and poets) of experience were already in line with the cultural policies of the PSOE government of the 1970s “situating itself as culturally dominant, reflects the cultural policies (and politics) of Felipe González’s PSOE government and, more generally, of the political élite of the transitional period.” (Mayhew *Twilight* 11).

transferable sociocultural and influential asset for the myriad poets of experience. Mayhew highlights one case in particular where two poets of experience were appointed to high office (for reasons up to and including their poetic stances), “Jon Juaristi and Luis Alberto de Cuenca were appointed to high positions by the Aznar government (...) in fact, this sort of poetry perfectly embodies the cultural aspirations and policies of the Spanish government.” (Mayhew *Twilight* 51). The government’s (re)adquisition of the realist-normative poetic tradition benefited state stability as a whole, as it was a way to “garantizar la estabilidad nacional” (Canteli Vigón 14).¹⁹ The association with these and other similar institutions is where the poets of experience were able to absorb generous amounts of symbolic power and then exercise that power in order to cement their centralization. However, this was only a part of their position takings and movements of self-fashioning during the 1980s and 1990s, which would also include the acquisition of literary prizes, editorial relations, unofficial and official recommendations, use of public funds for editing, influencing prize juries, and host of other methods of auto-legitimation (after all, perpetuation denotes stabilization and new conservatism):

Entiendo que este sector de la poesía española presenta

¹⁹Palacios Guzmán further elaborates the links between the poets of *La otra sentimentalidad* and the sociocultural molding aspirations of the P.S.O.E. government, and how this tremendously benefitted the former: “Mientras tanto, en España el P.S.O.E. ha llegado al poder e intenta crear una cultura a su medida: pequeñoburguesa, realista, urbana y con una barniz de izquierdas. Por primera vez entra el dinero a raudales en la vida literaria española. El felipismo se encarga de administrar las subvenciones, los premios, las apariciones en televisión..., de una manera partidista e injusta. Y se produce una gran escisión en la literatura española contemporánea. Por una parte se encuentran los oficiales, los mimados por el régimen; por el otro, los marginados. Entre los primeros, están los autores de ‘La Nueva Sentimentalidad’” (Palacios Guzmán 3)

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concordancia con las formas de poder del posfranquismo, ya sean éstas de corte socialdemócrata, escoradamente centrista o llanamente derechista. El caso es que los premios oficiales y oficiosos, los medios de comunicación, las editoriales relacionadas con ministerios y corporaciones, los libros de texto “recomendables” y los editados con dinero público, los críticos que quieren “hacer carrera” y en sus poses, los propios jefes de gobierno, esdecir, la práctica totalidad de los poderes capaces de suscitar popularidad, consumo y, en modesta medida, atributos de una especie de *star-system*, suelen preferir a estos poetas “inteligibles” que yo considero minirrealistas. (Gamoneda qtd. in Mayhew 26–27)

After having successfully established themselves as the de facto *statu quo* in the field of poetry by the early 1990s, the poets of experience begin a campaign (whether consciously or otherwise) to either suppress or ignore the sub-altern and marginalized poetic voices that could potentially interfere with their reign:²⁰ “todo lo que se sitúe en sus márgenes, fuera de esta *normalidad* poética (al igual que lo que se sitúe fuera de la *normalidad* política) sería ignorado” (Massieu 71). This is what Derrida purports when he delineates the center as limiting the free play of the other sectors within a noted structure (in this case, the poetic field), “The function of this center was not only to orient (...) but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would

²⁰ Even-Zohar posits a concomitant theory, “When a repertoire is established and all derivative models pertaining to it are constructed in full accordance with what it allows (...) any deviation will be considered outrageous.” (*Polysystem* 21). In addition, the repression of innovation is a defense mechanism in which those in power will “not admit elements which are likely to endanger its dominance in the system.” (22). However, the outcome of this strategy is a double edged sword, as it leads a direct path to a group’s eventual secundarization and petrification, an Icarian fall from the heavens to the sea.

limit what we might call the free play of the structure.” (*Structure, Sign, and Play* 1). In the discourse of late 20th century Spanish poetry, centralizing discourse of the poetry of experience can be noted as contrasting and constricting a periphery that necessitated its own freedom of poetic expression. As this particular field would be deeply steeped in the “official” or “canonical” ideology of the poetry of experience, their most iconic poets would be hoisted into the (inter)national Spanish poetic canon, thereby diffusing their works and aesthetic influence even further. Thus, much like the lord-peasant dichotomy of the medieval era, the ramifications of this discourse leads to the inevitable invisibility and repression of the other:

The ideology of an official culture as the only acceptable one in a given society has resulted in massive cultural compulsion affecting whole nations through a centralized educational system and making it impossible even for students of culture to observe and appreciate the role of the dynamic tensions which operate within the culture for its efficient maintenance. (Even-Zohar *Studies* 16)

However, as war cannot exist without peace, so then a school of poetry or ideological movement that is dominant or hegemonic cannot be without its opposite, and corollary, binary; this is what Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) refers to as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses. Although it is well documented by contemporary criticism that the poets of experience did in fact realize a canonized position in the Spanish literary field, it is of equal importance to note that they were never able to utterly suppress the voices of the subaltern nor obtain a complete cultural and literary monopoly (after all, such a literary event would be highly improbable to imagine in an industrialized democratic state and an interconnected,

globalized, world). Indeed, even during their zenith of power, there (always) already existed a parallel, if underground, literary flow emanating from dissenting voices that opposed, ignored or simply worked in different ways than the hegemony of the poetic field of the late 20th century. After a decade of a strong control of power and capital, a number of these “other” or “different” poets would vehemently denounce or protest against the dominant methods of the poets of experience in their extortion of awards, anthologies, and even their very inception in the literary canon (from their perspective, an imposition on the free forming poetic aesthetic discourses prevalent after the 1970s). Moreover, these different poets were opposed to the realist aesthetic of experience that they alleged lacked an avant-garde sensibility, moral criticism,²¹ was home to an unwelcoming and narcissistic “I” and, moreover, discredited the experimental discourses of poetic others:

En efecto, propugnan un lenguaje convencionalmente comprensible, predicán la circunstancialidad y vacuidad de las vanguardias y la inutilidad de la experimentación; se muestran contrarios a cualquier forma de originalidad o creatividad en el arte (...) acomodado en la experiencia socialmente armonizada para desacreditar cualquier discurso distinto (...) tachándolo de “galimatías”, insulto al lector”, etc.

(Suñén *La poesía* qtd. in Canteli Vigón)

²¹ According to Bagué Quílez, popular sentiment among the poets marginalized by center, stated that the suppressive influence of the poetry of experience’s “normalcy” was ultimately damaging the vitality of the general poetic discourse: “La serpiente intimista y la vista cansada de García Montero se convierten en emblemas de una sociedad que ha olvidado sus orígenes y que ha decidido anestesiar su conciencia rindiéndose al constante trasiego de imágenes que emiten los medios de comunicación” (57) .

Regardless of the critically objective or subjective take on the aesthetic or ideological qualities of the poetry of experience, what followed was that these alternate discourses took it upon themselves to break down what they understood to be the automatization of the poetic discourse by the 1990s.

One of the most famous (or infamous) cases of an anti-poetry of experience stance is the article “Una reclamación” (2000) by the poet Blanca Andreu, published in *El Cultural*. Within this text, Andreu writes a scathing vitriol against what she believes to be the utter banality of the aesthetic of experience due, in part, to an overwhelmingly positive critical praise that had been pandered for the hendecasyllabic verse “Tú me llamas, amor, yo cojo un taxi” by García Montero. Andreu finds the laudation of this verse a parody and almost certainly an absurdity that makes her question the status of the Spanish poetic discourse in the 2000s, and leaves her “estupefacta del grado de ceguera en que puede incurrir la crítica cuando trata de aupar a alguien (...) si ese es el mejor verso que se ha escrito en muchos años, la poesía ha muerto para siempre en una conversación de trastienda” (“Una reclamación”).²² Andreu further notes how the hegemonic position of the poets of experience is unfairly propagated and acquires legitimacy by its continuous links with fields of power, for example, through a parasitic relationship with elite literary critics like Francisco Rico; “en su mayoría pertenecen a la servidumbre del Profesor Rico” (“Una reclamación”). Andreu is not the first and certainly not the last voice that denounces the hegemony of the poets of experience since, especially in the 90s and the dawn of the new century (and now with

²² Andreu goes on to say: “me pregunto cómo es posible caer en la simpleza de considerar que la visión de un semáforo y del asfalto pueden constituir experiencia poética”. Eso es vivir en pozo seco, sin saber viajar con la mente y el espacio, que es lo mínimo que debe saber un escritor” (“Unareclamación”).

the possibility of knowledge of these events *a posteriori*), alternative critics begin to unravel the controversial and complex polemics that orbit around the poetry of experience and those who are different from them.

One of the most vocal critics appeared in 1996 as an anti-capitalist, anti-systemic, anti-poetry of experience attack that is mounted by a group of poets-activists known only under the alias “Colectivo Alicia Bajo Cero”. This collective group took the initiative to gather and publish articles that demonstrated the compromising policies and corrupt trends in the poetry of experience, as evidenced in their landmark work *Poesía y poder* (1996). Another critic, Araceli Iravedra, publishes the text *Radicales, marginales y heterodoxos en la última poesía española (contra la poesía de la experiencia)* (2006), where she engages in a direct dialogue with the defenses of the poetry of experience erected by Montero, and rejects his integrationist point of view in favor of the renewing voices of marginality. Jonathan Mayhew has written several articles and a book, *The Twilight of the Avant-Garde* (2009), in which he refutes the conservative atmosphere of contemporary Spanish poetry (alongside an apology to women poets of the same era). Other critical endeavors are relatively scant and scattered, offering varying degrees of complaints (or at least a demonstration of the controversy) through various forms of media, and some examples include: Ángel Luis Prieto de Paula in *Entre la disidencia y la asimilación: la poética de la experiencia* (2013), Genara Pulido Tirado in “La poesía de la experiencia y la crítica literaria en algunas antologías: hacia la fijación de un canon poético” (1999) and María Paz Moreno in “El lugar de la ‘poesía de la experiencia’ en la literatura del siglo XX: ¿Una posteridad calculada?” (2000). In addition, many literary anthologies began to be published that elucidated poets and poems from the margins while, concomitantly, rejecting the poetry of the center; some examples include *Feroces*.

Antología de la poesía radical, marginal y heterodoxa (1998) y *Voces del extremo* (1999).

What remains evident is that the poetic movements that opposed or paralleled the poetry of experience throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s became incredibly diverse, decentralized and fragmented, no doubt a product of the postmodern condition prevalent in continental Spain in the post-dictatorial era. Massieu in *La poesía y los márgenes* (2007) identifies a large number of anthologies and poetic texts that did not follow the hegemonic aesthetic (beginning as soon as 1982) and, moreover, identifies the unique currents of the poetry in the peripheries. Other specific trends that the above mentioned Julia Barella distinguishes include: the successors to the aesthetics of the *novísimos* (the poets demarcated as *Postnovísimos* by the anthology of Luis Antonio de Villena), defenders of decadentism and culturalism; poetry of reflection or poetry of silence that departs from experience into the realm of the mystical and ineffable (poets including Armando López Castro, Amparo Amorós, Julia Castillo); and the recovery of the symbolist and surrealist traditions (poets including Pere Gimferrer, Jorge Urrutia, César Antonio Molina, Blanca Andreu, Juan Carlos Mestre, etc.) (17). Following critic Juan María Calles, the following may be added as well: followers of the poetic tradition of Cernuda (such as Sánchez Chamorro); poetry that emulates the juanromaniano or baroque lineage (89); minimalist and *conceptismo* (poets including first name Ullán, Aníbal Núñez, Felipe Núñez) (92). There are also the aesthetic of metapoetry, experimental poetry and pure poetry. Finally, the anthology of Spanish poetry *Poesía española del 90* (2008) by Beatriz Ferrari outlines three general aesthetic trends and ideologies of the 1980s and 1990s -many of which carry over into the 21st century-: 1. Poetry of experience, 2. Poetry of Conscience, and 3. Poetry of Difference. These are but a few small samples of the voice of dissonance that have grown in parallel and evolved from the hegemonic

discourse of the poetry called “of the experience”.

The strength of the canon of poetry of experience can be traced through the chronological literary line of some of their key figures, as Bagué Quílez identifies: Benjamín Prado (*Ecuador. Poesía 1986-2001, 2002*), Felipe Benítez Reyes (*Rama de niebla. Poesía reunida, 1978-2002, 2003*), Vicente Gallego (*El sueño verdadero. Poesía 1988-2002, 2003*), Carlos Marzal (*El corazón perplejo. Poesía reunida, 1978-2004, 2005*), Luis Muñoz (*Limpiar pescado. Poesía reunida, 2005*) y Luis García Montero (*Poesía [1980-2005], 2006*) (50). Scarano in *La figuración realista en la poesía española de las últimas décadas* (2002) envisions the past two decades (and more) as lulled by the siren of realism, a poetry of “declarada vocación realista” (18). However, as made evident by the diachronic examination of their publication, the hegemony and homogeneity of the poets and poetry of experience naturally waned by the mid to late 1990s (and eventually tapering off by the dawn of the new millennium). The cultural power void they left behind would slowly become replaced by poetry of individuality and singularity, a recovery of avant-garde literary texts which had been largely silenced and rendered invisible for a period bordering on two decades.²³

Since its creation as a manifesto known as *La otra sentimentalidad* and its growth into the recognizable and populist brand of *poesía de la experiencia*, the poets of this hegemonic aesthetic and ideological movement have had a tremendous impact on the Spanish

²³ Saldaña reiterates the importance of the rediscovery of the texts silenced by the mechanisms of sociocultural control: “Esa vindicación de la singularidad alienta también el trabajo crítico que algunos estamos llevando a cabo desde hace tiempo, un trabajo centrado en la necesidad de recuperar algo tan simple –pero al parecer tan difícil– como es el latido de los textos literarios, silenciado por ese poderoso instrumento de control social que es el mercado, que supone una pérdida de la individualidad y, por lo tanto, un aumento de los comportamientos acrílicos” (qtd. in Mora 763).

literary field in the last decades of the 20th century and into the 21st. The poets of experience quickly achieved canonicity and notoriety, but as is the story of all hegemonic powers, evanesce of dominance eventually proves to be the key to its own eventual downfall. It is not as Veselovsky noted but rather Shklovsky's take on the subject of literary evolution - "The purpose of the new form is not to express new content, but to change an old form which has lost its aesthetic quality" (*Theory of Prose* 1)- that will oblige poetic change in an era of new historical and environmental forces. Difference to experience, a counter-hegemony, was already on the horizon in the Spanish poetic field at this particular fin de siècle, though to look at the poets and poetry that made this possible becomes a tale for another time.

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