

TEACHING GOLDEN AGE POETRY: THE OLD AND THE NEW

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The obvious challenge to teaching Renaissance and Baroque poetry in the new millennium is how make the material interesting and even relevant, while respecting the historical contexts and parameters and, of course, the beauty and richness of the texts themselves.¹ I will start with two premises that underlie my approach: first, that one need not be apologetic for the “old age” and “difference” of the poetic artifacts under scrutiny; and, second, that one can find a mediating agent in the ancient and modern—and even postmodern—phenomenon of *rhetoric*, arguably the basis of all literary and discursive analysis. As a corollary, it may be noted that the drama of the early modern period is primarily verse drama, so the lessons in poetry can do double duty. Thinking of advanced undergraduate and graduate classes that incorporate Golden Age poetry, I would like to focus on four questions: (1) how to prepare students to confront the poems, (2) what to look for in the poetic texts, (3) how to introduce critical and theoretical concepts, and (4) how to negotiate the “universality” and the “socio-historical backdrops” of poetry. I think that those of us who work in the medieval and early modern periods recognize—and emphasize—the need to comprehend the intertext, to realize that the latest literary achievements do not arise in a vacuum, and, at the same time, to acknowledge that recent theory can offer new means of looking at “classic” works and of discovering works that have been marginalized.

The sonnet is an obvious place to start and to observe the trajectory from Boscán and Garcilaso through Góngora, Quevedo, and other Baroque artists. In discussing the form of the sonnet, one can review (or teach) prosody and begin to cover the basic tropes and rhetorical figures. The *Comedia* website contains a guide entitled “La poética y la teoría literaria” prepared by Vern G. Williamsen that is very helpful in this regard.²

Issues such as scansion, rhyme schemes, and types of verse are not the bottom line in a course, but they are means to an end. One can take comfort in the fact that any investment of time in the study of rhetorical figures will be a gift that goes on giving, from the literature

(and orations) of classical antiquity to the latest in spin doctoring. When I teach the introduction to Hispanic literature, I pick fifteen figures, and increase that number by ten or fifteen in more advanced classes. My theme for study of the sonnet, borrowed from Harold Bloom, is “the anxiety of influence.” The sonnet is short, has a strictly prescribed form, and a somewhat limited range of topics (*carpe diem*, *la brevedad engañosa de la vida*, the ups and downs of love, feminine beauty, dreams and reality, mythology, religious devotion, and so forth). The objective of the poet is to create something fresh within a restricted area, as it were. Garcilaso must confront Petrarch and the classical tradition. The notoriously competitive Baroque poets combat their Renaissance predecessors and *their* predecessors. That is why a sonnet such as Góngora’s “Mientras por competir con tu cabello” is so radically aggressive. This *carpe diem* poem has to surpass not only Garcilaso’s “En tanto que de rosa y azucena” but Ausonius’s “Collige, virgo, rosas” and everything between them, so it is not surprising that what starts out as a strategy for seduction and a look at the imminence of old age becomes a matter of life and death. With Garcilaso on one end and Lope, Góngora, Quevedo, and (in Mexico) Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz on the other—with Herrera as a mediating point (and, for some, a representative of mannerism)—it is possible to signal a progression toward the intensity of *culteranismo* and *conceptismo* and the implicit rivalry that the movement entails. Extending beyond the sonnet, it is useful to read Garcilaso’s first eclogue against Góngora’s *Polifemo*, for example. (Parenthetically, one may add that an *a lo divino* counterpart of sorts would be the contrast between the poetry of Fray Luis de León and that of San Juan de la Cruz, though operating on a higher plane in every sense. Passages from Sor Juana’s *Primero sueño* could work in both realms.)

Garcilaso achieves a balance of discourse and emotion; grief is profound, yet beautiful and controlled. As their names signal, the two shepherds represent phases of the author’s own life and of his own sadness, but the human side cannot separate itself from the poetic side, and suffering is made poetic. Góngora’s vision is convoluted by design. The very choice of the cyclops denotes disproportion, aberration, exaggeration. The love triangle is completely out of kilter with normalcy and moderation. The structure and language of the poem become analogues of the monster who knows no bounds and whose voice rises above all others. Figures and conceits abound, and the reader is left to decipher the verbal puzzles and to reduce the plot to its ordinary (standardized) elements. Even with its generous dose of *conceptismo*, the *Polifemo* is first and foremost a conduit for poetic largesse, a sterling paradigm of *culteranismo*. And this is where Sor

Juana outdoes Góngora, by placing the *Primero sueño* at the service of language, philosophy, and theology. When the reader, doubtlessly with difficulty, can manage to conquer the linguistic and rhetorical barriers, there remain conceptual and ideological hurdles to overcome. Sor Juana adds a stage, or more, to the process of decoding or deciphering. She amplifies the base by penetrating the oneiric and spiritual planes, and, thus, with complexity as the criterion, she can be said to best her (Spanish, male, and elitist) rival as a Baroque artist. Similarly, she sets herself up to vie with Calderón through the feminist and New World inclinations of her play *Los empeños de una casa*.

There are a number of options for introductory readings for a poetry class, but I would recommend selections from Pedro Salinas's *Reality and the Poet in Spanish Poetry*, Elias Rivers's *Quixotic Scriptures*, Anne J. Cruz's *Imitación y transformación*, Ignacio Navarrete's *Orphans of Petrarch*, Arthur Terry's *Seventeenth-Century Spanish Poetry*, and the recently published *Idea de la lírica en el Renacimiento*, edited by María José Vega and Cesc Esteve, as well as essays from *Calíope* and other journals, and perhaps examples from Edward Hirsch's *How To Read a Poem*.³ The initial analysis of poems can be reduced, I would submit, to three questions: What is the poem about? How do language and content function reciprocally? And how does the poet put his or her individual mark—a voice, a technique, an identifiable inscription—on established conventions, on tradition? A general sense of the classical antecedents, the Renaissance innovations (with special attention to Petrarchism), and the mechanics of poetic composition should enable students to tackle texts from Boscán to Sor Juana. Needless to say, I would want the reading and reflection on the poems, including short reaction papers—together with the class discussion—to be the key factors in the process. I am looking here to generate interest in—and empathy for—the poet at the moment of constructing a poem, namely, an awareness of the poet's need to adhere to a rigid protocol while seeking some type of novelty, some type of differentiation from other hands and other minds. And, ideally speaking, to cite the subtitle of Hirsch's book, to have students "fall in love with poetry." I think that can be accomplished—to a greater or lesser degree—by giving students the means to appreciate poems (through knowledge of the formal aspects of composition) and to understand the poet's burden as a writer and as a figure in literary history.

In order to provide theoretical contexts for the study of poetry in a graduate seminar, I try to present models according to the ways in which they view the poetic object, using as bases Russian Formalism, North American New Criticism, structuralism, semiotics, poststructuralism, and cultural studies.⁴ The itinerary represents,

among other things, a movement away from and then back to ideology, although we have learned—or knew all along—that no approach—and no text—is ideologically empty. It is not necessary to rehearse theoretical schools with this readership, but I will try to indicate what I accentuate from each model. Russian Formalism asks the reader to focus on the “literariness” of fictional discourse: words, images, sounds, aesthetic qualities. Its emphasis on perception is seen in the idea—most associated with Victor Shklovsky—of *defamiliarization*—the deliberate undermining of the familiar, the easily recognizable, in favor of devices that will promote new expressions and sharpened visions of reality. The connection with Spanish Baroque poetry is obvious, especially since much of the discussion centers on metaphor. The North American New Critics, who privilege lyric poetry, stress the need to consider the poetic object free of its historical author and its specific readers—hence, the *archi-conocidas* intentional and affective fallacies. The exceptionally skillful close readings and the search for tensions, ambiguity, irony, and paradox offer instructions for *intrinsic* access to poems. The notion of the internal context always begs the question of what stands *outside* of interpretation—when poetic truth and morality can make it to the inside—and this doubt allows the process to move forward.

Likewise subordinating the external to the internal, much of structuralism’s treatment of poetry underscores the unique language of the poetic text, which produces a special set of expectations on the part of the reader. It can be noted that structuralism blends poetry with poetics, presupposing, in general, the structural *unity* of the poem and its thematic *significance*, understood, to a large degree, as metapoetic, as a statement about poetic creation itself. Analysis—frequently called *description*—becomes a search for binary oppositions, word plays, and elements that can be read metaphorically or metonymically. (But, on the other hand, interrelated deep structures go well beyond literary texts.) In *Semiotics of Poetry*, published in 1978, Michael Riffaterre builds on the structuralist project to propose a set of criteria to apply to the comprehension of a poem, seen as a type of mystery to be resolved by a conscientious reading. His method is fascinating, engaging, and highly debatable, but it offers a specific means to approach, for example, a Golden Age sonnet. Beyond the initial, linear reading of a poem, Riffaterre calls for a second, retroactive or “truly hermeneutic” reading, which includes the positing of a *matrix*, actualized in successive variants within the text; a *model*, the first or primary actualization; and a *hypogram*, a remnant of the intertextual past, the recognition of which permits entry into the poem, by means of a sign, or *interpretant*, which takes us from the mimetic level to the

poetic, from meaning to significance. Riffaterre refers to reading poetry as a game, and this ludic aspect can animate the exercise of analysis. One does not have to be completely sold on the methodology to test it on sonnets, because the application cannot take place without a concentrated effort to bring together the disparate components of the text, to make sense of a distinctively poetic reality (see also Friedman).

The vast poststructuralist paradigm, which to my mind inflects all commentary that comes afterward, is predicated on the destabilization and deferral—the *deconstruction*—of announced or apparent meanings, from within and from without. This is, of course, a radical concept that affects semantics, philosophy, subjectivity, the designation of authority, and points in between. One challenge introduced by poststructuralism is to determine how a poem undoes its initial premises—a negative hermeneutics that recasts both traditional hermeneutics and rhetoric. The beauty and/or the frustration of deconstruction in practice is that it is never definitive and never-ending. To give a miniscule example, I would ask you to recall Góngora's well-known love sonnet, "De pura honestidad templo sagrado."⁵ The poem is an extended metaphor that compares the glorious physicality of the love object to a holy temple "por divina mano fabricado." The architectural analogy is complemented by familiar Petrarchan imagery, such as "pequeña puerta de coral preciado." The second tercet reads: "Ídolo bello, a quien humilde adoro: / oye piadoso al que por ti suspira, / tus himnos canta y tus virtudes reza." The sonnet disrupts the carefully crafted metaphor by forgetting that it is a metaphor, by equating the object created by God with an idol that becomes the poetic speaker's deity, thus decentering the Christian God. Similarly, Quevedo's "Amor constante más allá de la muerte" places the intensity of love in a mythological sphere that allows the speaker to forget that "beyond death" lies eternity rather than "polvo enamorado." This takes us to a kind of poetic unconscious that—following the precedent of structuralism—places critics in the center of the analytical performance, and, as such, makes their pronouncements subject to decentering.

The imprint of poststructuralism—which, naturally, bears the imprint of structuralism and its interdisciplinary roots—is evident in studies of gender and sexuality, and psychoanalytical, postcolonial, neo-Marxist, new historicist, and other ideologically-based theories that inform critical commentary. That fact may be especially important with regard to Golden Age poetry, which has been seen as artistically sophisticated and filled with brilliant conceits but ideologically light. Because the Baroque is associated with the politics and the policies of early modern Spain—imperial Spain in its glory and decline—there is a tendency on the part of some scholars to see complicity when the

texts themselves may disclose strategies of nonconformity. The picaresque, for example, inverts center and margin, and even though the *pícaro* (or *pícaro*) rarely thrives, idealistic literature and society at large are as much the objects of satire as are the roguish antiheroes, who more often than not have distinctive voices and souls. The verbal meanderings of a Guzmán de Alfarache, a fully drawn character in his own right, bespeak a Mateo Alemán tortured by a legacy that forces him to pass as an Old Christian. Neither serves as an emblem of imperialism. Even Pablos, poles apart from Quevedo in class and *modus operandi*, carries, for better or worse, the social and moral weight of the *Buscón*. Despite the dominating presence of his master, Pablos contributes to a radicalization of the lower depths. In the dramatic interlude “El retablo de las maravillas,” Cervantes veils critique in farce as he lambastes the national obsession with blood purity. *Don Quijote* brings together a marginalized protagonist whose enterprise consists of removing his fellow characters from the center and whose chronicler resides in the margins of Spanish history and of Christianity. María de Zayas’s women are also defined by their isolation from the centers of authority. In contrast, Góngora, Quevedo, and other Baroque poets recoil from the popular, and from the *vulgo*, in their calculatedly obscure works, and their cultural elitism has social and political implications. The Polifemo of the *Fábula*—in his bulk and in his pride of possession—may symbolize the Spain of Góngora’s day, but it would seem that he more credibly symbolizes a devotion to language and a devotion to competition on the part of the poet. Góngora indeed evokes the center, but it is a center that requires qualification and that belongs to a system of erratic, ironic, and subtly or not so subtly subversive centers.

How can an instructor lead students to merge the intrinsic with the extrinsic? These days, given the predominance of cultural studies in the curriculum and the market, it might be more appropriate to ask how long one can avoid the *extrinsic*. I would insist that the fundamental tools of poetry are an essential part of the enterprise, as are close readings that determine—rather than are predetermined by—particular modes of contextualization. The tripartite sequence—study of the formal properties of poetry, individual readings followed by group dialogue, and application of theory—is what I am calling the juxtaposition of the old with the new. The third stage includes analytical experiments derived from approaches such as Riffaterre’s, a look at theory in the abstract and a consideration of potential applications, and, finally, a metacritical or metatheoretical reading of studies on Golden Age poetry. To cite a few examples, one could look at selected chapters of José Antonio Maravall’s *Culture of the Baroque*, John Brannigan’s *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*, and Alan Sinfield’s

Faultlines, and essays from *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint; *Lyric Poetry Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker; *Literature Among Discourses*, ed. Wlad Godzich and Nicholas Spadaccini; *Cultural Authority in Golden Age Spain*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht; *Hispanic Baroques*, ed. Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martín-Estudillo; and *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During.

The ideal critical essay, from the metacritical-metatheoretical perspective, would be one that deals directly with texts and issues that concern us and that can extend the parameters of previous discussion. My example here will be a chapter entitled “Instinct and Object: Subjectivity and Speech-Act in Garcilaso de la Vega,” from *Ideologies of History in the Spanish Golden Age* by Anthony J. Cascardi. Cascardi uses Garcilaso de la Vega as an example of a poetic authority “always-already-mediated,” and thus an object of reconstruction, and, at the same time, as the protagonist of a personal drama poeticized. Lyric poetry becomes a potential locus for the satisfaction of desires that remain unsatisfied in life, and the struggle revealed in the verse relates to literary history, to subject-formation, and to the elusive and ambiguous aspects of composition and commentary. Through Garcilaso, Cascardi explores the impact of authority on the writing process by choosing a model of poetic power that would have been classic—relatively recent, yet exalted—for Cervantes. In addition to providing a strategy for reading a poem such as the first eclogue, Cascardi takes as his point of departure William Kerrigan and Gordon Braden’s *The Idea of the Renaissance*, which, in Cascardi’s words, advances “the claim that the Petrarchan love lyric can best be approached in terms of an object-relations psychoanalysis that has its basis in Freud’s distinction between the ancients and the moderns.” In the course of the discussion, Cascardi brings in major studies by John Freccero, Thomas M. Greene, Roland Greene, Jacques Lacan, John Beverley, Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, Diana de Armas Wilson, Norbert Elias, Julia Kristeva, George Mariscal, Elias Rivers, and others. Although Cascardi is all over the theoretical map, the presentation is clear, and one can get a sense of approaches to the Renaissance, “post-Petrarchism” (Roland Greene’s title), desire, subject formation, literary elitism, and—to be sure—Garcilaso.

The approach that I have suggested hardly elides the past, literary or academic, but strives to expand upon a solid base by placing Renaissance and Baroque texts in theoretical context and by exploring ties, for example, between the early modern, the modern, and the postmodern, and between the baroque, the neobaroque, and the ultrabaroque. In sum, I hope to see my old seminars in my new

seminars, but with a difference, infused with current insights and polemics. I would not go so far as to say, “I am my own intertext,” but I would say—figuratively but quite unpoetically—that I do not want to seek all my critical and theoretical eggs “en los nidos de antaño.”

Notes

¹I cannot discuss my approach to teaching Golden Age poetry without acknowledging, with gratitude, the graduate seminars taught by Elias L. Rivers at Johns Hopkins University. The skill and sensitivity that he applied to the analysis of poetry are on my mind whenever I present Renaissance and baroque texts in my own classes. I recall that when—at a conference, a couple of years after receiving my degree—I had the opportunity to meet Dámaso Alonso, who had been Elias Rivers’s teacher, Don Dámaso told me that the Rivers translation of *Hijos de la ira* was better than the original. I remember, as well, that, at the same conference, my paper was scheduled opposite that of Dámaso Alonso, and Elias Rivers chose to attend mine, an act that only added to the admiration that I felt for him. It is a true honor to have studied with him, and it is always a pleasure to read his published work. I am also indebted to my Hopkins cohort, which included Emilie Bergmann, David Garrison, Ester Gimbernat de González, Ray Green, Dona Kercher, Isabella Lanzano Kyser, Ana María Snell, Maribel Tamargo, and the late Peter Komanecky.

²The following is my basic chart for looking at poetry, which I use in the course on Introduction to Hispanic Literature and in more advanced classes:

CÓMO LEER UN POEMA:

Una aproximación

la lectura lineal: →→→→→→→→→→

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↓
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↓

la lectura analítica: el acto de “procesar los datos” de la lectura lineal

clasificar el poema: poema narrativo, poema lírico,
poema dramático, metapoema

¿poema estrófico?

¿versos de arte mayor o de arte menor?

¿rima consonante, rima asonante o verso libre?

- la lectura analítica: describir cómo el hablante poético “habla” (cómo crea una *voz* poética)
- notar los elementos lingüísticos más importantes (las imágenes, las figuras retóricas, otros elementos estilísticos)
- identificar los “misterios” (lo difícil, lo ambiguo, lo problemático) del texto e intentar resolverlos
- buscar los temas e ideas más significativos
- relacionar la forma con el contenido
- señalar la presencia en el poema de las tradiciones o convenciones poéticas (el poema como variación de un determinado tema)

³Among recent and useful guides—to refrain from using the term *manual*—I would recommend Gies (ed.) and Walters.

⁴For a survey of these approaches, see, for example, Newton.

⁵For this and other poems cited, see the Rivers anthology.

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