The Cambridge Introduction to Spanish Poetry

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Chapter 1

Poets and readers

Few Spanish poets have been what might be termed professional poets. Lorca, perhaps the best-known of all, is untypical in being as near to a full-time writer as one could envisage. Even the jobbing poet of the Middle Ages – the minstrel – is denied a place of honour in Spanish literature given the dearth of surviving epic poems and the likely learned authorship of the *Poema de mío Cid*. The Middle Ages do, however, provide some of the classic profiles of Spanish poets, notably the figure of the poet-cleric. The contrasting figures of Berceo and the Archpriest of Hita established a trend that was to continue into the Golden Age whereby clerics wrote secular as well as religious poetry. Thus the major figures of the Golden Age include the love poet Fernando de Herrera (1534–97), the holder of a small lay benefice in the church of San Andrés in Seville; Góngora, who entered the Church in order to accept a prebend renounced in his favour by an uncle; the theologian Fray Luis de León (1527–91); and the Carmelite mystic, San Juan de la Cruz (1542–91).

The figure of the poet-courtier, that would be a dominant presence at the start of the seventeenth century in such figures as the Conde de Salinas (1564–1630) and the Conde de Villamediana (1582–1622), is anticipated by such aristocratic poets of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the Marqués de Santillana (1398–1458) and Juan de Mena (1411–56). The Duque de Rivas, an aristocrat and politician, was following in a long line. In his youth Rivas had also been a soldier and was wounded in the Peninsular War. The figure of the soldier-poet can also be traced back into the Medieval period. Because of the Aragonese possessions in Italy the leading Catalan poets of the early fifteenth century, Jordi de Sant Jordi (1400–24) and Ausiàs March (*c*. 1397–1459), had served abroad. This trend was more pronounced a century later when Spain, already unified by the joining of the crowns of Castile and Aragon, acquired further possessions through the accession of Charles V to the throne and his subsequent election as Holy Roman Emperor. The following decades were the heyday of the soldier-poet, the most celebrated of whom, Garcilaso de la Vega, was killed in battle near Nice in 1536. The epitome, however, of the figure of the soldier-poet, representative of Spain's international commitments and ambitions in the

sixteenth century, is Francisco de Aldana (1537–78). Of Spanish parentage he grew up at the court of Cosimo de Medici in Florence and served in the Spanish campaigns in the Low Countries in the 1570s. He set foot in Spain for the first time only in 1577 when he was appointed Governor of the fortress of San Sebastian. The following year he died in the service of King Sebastian of Portugal at the battle of Alcazarquivir in North Africa.

The modern era has, for obvious enough reasons, seen the emergence of different types. A characteristic twentieth-century figure is the poet-scholar. The precursor was perhaps Antonio Machado. Although he never attained an elevated academic position – for most of his life he was a provincial schoolteacher – he became increasingly preoccupied with philosophical ideas and metaphysical concerns that had scarcely bothered Spanish Romantics or even the *modernistas*. It was with the Generation of 1927, however, that the poet-scholar came to prominence. The monumental scholarship of Dámaso Alonso has already been mentioned, and to this can be added the influential editorial activity of Gerardo Diego and Emilio Prados (1899–1962), and the academic affiliation, especially after the Civil War, of Pedro Salinas (1891–1951) and Jorge Guillén (1893–1986). The most recent development for Spanish poets perhaps has been a shift from the academic to a greater variety of professions, including law and journalism, although the poet-scholar is still an important figure as in the case of Guillermo Carnero (1947–), who figures in this study both as a poet and as an editor.

The modern image of the process of getting a poem into print – the poet being inspired to write, submitting a manuscript to the publisher, waiting for acceptance, correcting proofs, and seeing his book published and (hopefully) bought for private reading – is precisely that: a modern image. It describes only one – if the most recent – model of the poetic enterprise from conception to fruition and also only one poet–reader relationship. As we have glimpsed already, however, the circumstances of composition and reception of two of the earliest masterpieces of Spanish poetry are far removed from the standard contemporary model. Both these Medieval works appear to have been designed for performance, the *Poema de mío Cid* for entertainment and perhaps propaganda, Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* for entertainment and instruction. The former was, as we have seen, likely to have been the work of a learned writer aping the devices of an orally composing poet. The latter was a free translation into rhyming fourteen-syllable lines of a Latin prose text. Berceo did not conceive his role as that of the inspirational poet figure so beloved of the Romantic and modern eras, but as a craftsman, in his words, as a 'leal obrero de Dios' ('loyal workman of God').

In both cases the concept of 'audience' is more specific than a modern understanding might acknowledge. The audience consisted quite simply of

those who had turned up. Indeed, until quite recently, audiences and readers have been far more clearly definable, a situation that related to the way in which poetry circulated. Until the seventeenth century – two centuries beyond the invention of printing – Spanish poetry circulated mainly in manuscript form. Such a mode of diffusion was by no means confined to minor or anonymous poets; many works by writers of the stature of Góngora and Quevedo have come down to us in this form, in the process often posing sizeable problems of attribution.

With a restricted public, poets, more consciously than nowadays, wrote mainly with an audience in mind. They knew, as they wrote, who would read their verses, and such a knowledge influenced what they wrote. With an audience of fellow-poets – rivals as well as friends – they might adopt an allusive and playful manner. Emulation and competition were powerful motivators and were consistent with Renaissance precepts about the imitation of good models, contemporary as well as classical. Poetry of this kind was social in implication, again in a way unfamiliar to modern readers. One reason why Spanish poets of the Golden Age were unconcerned about having their works published was that the principal outlets for their poetry were formal literary gatherings. The favoured milieux for the major poets of the seventeenth century were academies in such cities as Madrid, Seville and Valencia. These had their origins in the literary gatherings and performances in Andalusian cities in the time of the Moors and continued sporadically in the Medieval period, especially in the courts of Alfonso X and Juan II of Castile. In more recent times the distinctively Spanish *tertulia* – a semi-formal gathering of friends in a café to discuss literary and other matters – represents an important offshoot of the academy. Lorca's earliest performances of his poems took place at a *tertulia* in the Café Rincón in Granada. Indeed Lorca's own career as a poet epitomizes some of the tensions implicit in an understanding of how poetry and audience can relate. He was a charismatic reciter of his verse, for whom an English-language equivalent might be Dylan Thomas. He was generally diffident, however, about the activities associated with publication. He was remiss in such routine matters as the reading of proofs and showed little urgency about getting completed work published, sometimes leaving near-completed projects tantalizingly unfinished. As a result some works appeared only many years after completion, while others were published posthumously with all the drawbacks that such publications entail. It was as though Lorca acknowledged that once a work was set in print it was no longer his own, not something over which he could enjoy the privileges of sole proprietorship as an author–performer.

The trend in the promotion of poetry over the past five hundred years has been towards a published medium for public sale and private reading, and away from individual ownership for public performance. This has been

a trend, however, rather than an unvarying norm. The act of private reading was implicitly recognized as essential during the later Renaissance period for an adequate appreciation of longer poems like the literary epic or coherent groupings of poems such as sonnet sequences. Conversely, on various occasions in the modern era the potency of spoken verse, of poetry recited in public, has been evident. The ballads of the Spanish Civil War and the rich vein of Latin American protest poetry are two such manifestations. Indeed these poems are apt to seem banal and inflated when set down on the page and subjected to the kind of close-reading scrutiny we apply to poetry destined for individual reading. Interestingly the compositional processes of this kind of poetry are reminiscent of the procedure in the *Poema de mío Cid* insofar as we assume a learned, or certainly a literate, poet who creates a work that supposes an illiterate audience, or at least one deprived of the possibility of the written medium.

Modern poetry in particular, however, betrays on occasion a tendency that is the very opposite to this reaching out to a public. The notion of poetry as a private world and a hermetic activity, forbidding in its desire to avoid communication and thus apparently to ignore the reader, has arisen at the same time that poetry has, through lower publication costs and improved technology, become theoretically more accessible. The paradox is more intriguing if we think, say, not of a poet like the introverted Emilio Prados, a member of the Generation of 1927, but of his contemporary Pablo Neruda. The latter's earliest collection, *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* was a runaway success. It is not, however, by most definitions, poetry that is readily understood. Its imagery is dense and complex and, through subtle allusion, evokes the baroque poets of Spain, especially Quevedo. We might justifiably posit another model of readership from this case whereby the owning of books is not tantamount to the reading of books, nor to the active appreciation of poetry. It comprises instead what could be described as a form of mass popular bibliophily.

Those non-reading owners of books that one must presume in the case of a poet like Neruda represent an extreme of passive readership. Most formulations of the poet–reader relationship, however, are in fact predicated on an active (poet) – passive (reader) model. In *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* Raman Selden suggests a scheme for the literary process, based on Roman Jakobson's diagram of linguistic communication, comprising three parts or, conceived in temporal terms, three stages: writer – text – reader.[1] While we conventionally refer to the poetic text as 'the work', a poem *works* only by the involvement of the other two elements: the creator/writer and the receiver/reader. Such a consideration may appear too obvious to be worth stating insofar as it refers to the writer, but it has not always been so in the case of the reader. In an influential survey of the history

of modern theory Terry Eagleton argues that the acknowledgement of the reader's role in 'realizing' a poem is a recent phenomenon:

> Indeed one might very roughly periodize the history of modern literary theory in three stages: a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years. The reader has always been the most underprivileged of this trio – strangely, since without him or her there would be no literary texts at all. Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author.[2]

Such an awareness of the reader's role goes beyond theorizing. It has practical implications for how to read poetry, encouraging us to be more rigorous in defining what happens when we are reading. Apart from this positive contribution (some of whose implications I shall explore in the course of this chapter), affording readers their rightful place in the scheme of things can serve as a corrective to critical fallacies.

A common misconception in approaching poetry is to assume an autobiographical intent by default: a poem is therefore held to be not only *by* someone but *about* someone. More than that it is assumed to be reflective so that an 'I' in the poem is tantamount to the 'I' that is the poet, and what happens in the poem has also happened in the life. I am not suggesting that poetry does not have an autobiographical aspect. Rather I am urging caution about simplifying and prioritizing it because in the process the reader's horizons are artificially narrowed. Let us consider two Spanish poems separated by 400 years. In Garcilaso's *Égloga primera* the shepherd Salicio complains at his abandonment by Galatea, who has chosen another lover; another shepherd, Nemoroso, mourns the untimely death of his beloved, Elisa. Until quite recently it was commonly accepted that this poem was a close reflection of events in Garcilaso's life: his love for a Portuguese lady-in-waiting by the name of Isabel Freire, who married another man, and her death in childbirth (a detail reproduced in the poem) a few years later. The poem was read effectively as the embodiment of these experiences and through successive generations a romantic myth was created. Not even the discovery that Garcilaso almost certainly did not meet Isabel Freire in the year when it was assumed that he fell in love with her has dented this myth. Yet even to argue over what Garcilaso was supposed to have been doing or feeling when he wrote the poem misses the point. The poem is the same whether Garcilaso was passionately in love for several years or whether he never knew Isabel Freire. One suspects the truth to be somewhere in between but even such a cautious conclusion is unhelpful because it only continues to

tell us about the *causes* of the poem. It tells us nothing about effects; and such autobiographical solutions impoverish the reader. To return to Selden's scheme, the emphasis on the author–text relationship is so pronounced that the text–reader relationship is overlooked. In the process it would be easy and tempting to be blind to other considerations. On the one hand we might ignore the fact that in 1527 the Italian poet Luigi Tansillo wrote a poem entitled *I due pellegrini* ('The two pilgrims') that contained the same contrast between betrayal and bereavement as had Garcilaso's poem. Moreover, the biographical reading can curtail text-based activity, for example examining the very structuring of the poem. The equal division of space between the two laments – recalling some of Virgil's *Eclogues* – encourages the reader to think of them as competing rather than just complementary songs, maybe prompting the question 'Which is the greater sorrow?' This competitive aspect and our awareness of a playful dimension is also suggested by the highlighting of imagery for the two shepherds. Salicio's amatory rage is initially conceived in terms of fire – testament to his fierce jealousy:

> ¡Oh más dura que mármol a mis quejas
> y al encendido fuego en que me quemo
> más helada que nieve, Galatea![3]
>
> O harder than marble to my laments, and more frozen than snow to the blazing fire in which I burn, Galatea!

The image that sets the tone for Nemoroso's lament, however, is the opposite one: water. His, accordingly, is a gentler grief:

> Corrientes aguas puras, cristalinas,
> árboles que os estáis mirando en ellas,
> verde prado de fresca sombra lleno
> (p. 128)
>
> Pure and crystal-clear flowing waters, trees that look at yourselves in them, a green meadow full of fresh shade

Biographical elements figure in a rather different way in Rafael Alberti's *Sobre los ángeles* (*Concerning the Angels*). They appear sporadically as snippets of life – almost as a collage-effect, a characteristic of Surrealist art. Alberti, however, unlike Garcilaso, also supplied what could be described as a confirmative document in the shape of an autobiography – *La arboleda perdida* (*The Lost Grove*). It is therefore possible, as both commentators and editors have done, to set the two texts alongside each other and use the prose autobiography as a critical tool. The danger of this approach is that it is far too limiting and will suppress the deductions and leaps that are part of the reader's task in reading (or even making) the poem. In the case of the poem

'El ángel de las bodegas' ('The angel of the wine-cellars') it is tempting to be content merely with the information that Alberti's family had been involved in the wine trade and that the business was unsuccessful.[4] To explain such lines as the opening – 'Fue cuando la flor del vino se moría en penumbra / y dijeron que el mar la salvaría del sueño' ('It was when the flower of the wine was dying in the shadow / and they said that the sea would save it from sleep') – in terms of what happened to the Alberti family rather than in terms of the negativing of an image with powerful sacramental overtones ('la flor del vino') is to reduce the text.[5] The symbolic potency of such a phrase is thereby all too easily ignored.

If biographical readings have an inhibiting effect the same can be said for context. By this I mean what is sometimes rather vaguely described as the 'background' to a poem, for example the social or historical circumstances in which a poem is written. All too often the background, by a critical leap, becomes the explanation of the poem, its rationale. Again I shall consider two poems separated in time. The first is a sonnet by Francisco de Quevedo that dates from around 1613:

> Miré los muros de la patria mía,
> si un tiempo fuertes, ya desmoronados,
> de la carrera de la edad cansados,
> por quien caduca ya su valentía.
>
> Salíme al campo, vi que el sol bebía
> los arroyos del yelo desatados,
> y del monte quejosos los ganados,
> que con sombras hurtó su luz al día.
>
> Entré en mi casa; vi que, amancillada,
> de anciana habitación era despojos;
> mi báculo, más corvo y menos fuerte;
>
> vencida de la edad sentí mi espada.
> Y no hallé cosa en que poner los ojos
> que no fuese recuerdo de la muerte.[6]
>
> I looked at the walls of my native place, once strong and now dilapidated, weary with the passing of time, as a result of which their strength is now sapped. I went out into the countryside, I saw that the sun drank the streams released from ice, and the cattle complaining that the mountain stole their daylight with its shadows. I went into my house; I saw that it was the rubble of an old, tarnished habitation; my walking-stick, more curved and less strong; I felt my sword overcome by age. And I found nothing on which to set my eyes that was not a reminder of death.

A number of extra-textual factors converge upon this text and distort its impact. Firstly, there is the historical situation. It was written at a time

when, according to conventional interpretations assisted by hindsight, the vast Spanish Empire was starting to show signs of crumbling. Secondly, Quevedo was chiefly known as a satirist: a sharply sceptical commentator on the events of his day, someone whom it could be presumed would be alive to the symptoms of a national malaise. If we add to these non-textual issues the word for 'native-land' in the first line of the sonnet and the image of crumbling walls we seem to have all we need to define the piece as a poem that is a memorable summation of a historical process. What we do not yet have, however, is either the remainder of the sonnet or the poems that precede and follow it in the collection in which it appears. Both these make it clear that the subject is of an individual significance, not a national one. We do not need to rely upon even these, however, to challenge the historical interpretation. The word 'patria', commonly taken to mean 'native-land', also had the meaning of 'town', an understanding that in fact relates more readily with 'walls' than does the less concrete and particularized word 'native-land'. Indeed it is feasible that 'muros desmoronados' refers to the walls of Madrid that were being knocked down as the city was being enlarged at the start of the seventeenth century. It is significant that the historical readings of Quevedo's sonnet tend to cite the opening two lines and leave it at that – a glaring omission, for the later part of the sonnet has an obviously personal and individual preoccupation. As we shall see below, however, decoders of poems tend in one way or another to be partial, one mode of partiality being selective quotation. This involves using the text to 'prove' an idea, which in all likelihood will have derived, as here, from non-textual sources.

My second example of the imposition of a historical reading on a poem concerns Antonio Machado's 'El hospicio', the fourth poem in *Campos de Castilla*:

> Es el hospicio, el viejo hospicio provinciano,
> el caserón ruinoso de ennegrecidas tejas
> en donde los vencejos anidan en verano
> y graznan en las noches de invierno las cornejas.
>
> Con su frontón al Norte, entre los dos torreones
> de antigua fortaleza, el sórdido edificio
> de grietados muros y sucios paredones,
> es un rincón de sombra eterna. ¡El viejo hospicio!
>
> Mientras el sol de enero su débil luz envía,
> su triste luz velada sobre los campos yermos,
> a un ventanuco asoman, al declinar el día,
> algunos rostros pálidos, atónitos y enfermos,
>
> a contemplar los montes azules de la sierra;
> o, de los cielos blancos, como sobre una fosa,

caer la blanca nieve sobre la fría tierra,
¡sobre la tierra fría la nieve silenciosa![7]

It is the poorhouse, the old provincial poorhouse, the ruined mansion with blackened tiles, where the swifts nest in summer, and the crows caw on winter nights. With its façade to the north, between the two turrets of an ancient fortress, the squalid building with its cracked and dirty walls is a corner of eternal shadow. The old poorhouse! While the January sun casts its weak light, its veiled sad light on the barren fields, pale, bewildered and sick faces appear at an ugly window as the day ends, to see the blue hills of the sierra, or from the white skies, as though upon a grave, white snow falling on the cold world, on the cold earth the silent snow!

This collection is quite reasonably acknowledged as one of the key works of the Generation of 1898. Machado himself recognized the importance of the historical theme, although the book itself is varied in content and style, covering as it does poems written over a period of ten years. Perhaps because of this authorial self-assessment one critic feels justified in describing the poem as 'una profunda metáfora para expresar el estado de su España contemporánea y de las condiciones de muchos de sus habitantes' ('a profound metaphor by which to express the state of the Spain of his day and of the conditions of many of its inhabitants').[8] The problem with this kind of interpretation is not so much that it cannot be shown to be right as that it cannot be shown to be wrong. The case does not rest on the effects of the poem but upon the alleged intention. It depends on circumstantial evidence: the period, the title of the collection, the poet's declared priority. The interpretive method in such instances, however, readily becomes circular. The text both suggests and eventually confirms (how could it do otherwise?) the initial intuition, which is a combination of biography, history and text. It fails to address what the text *does* (a process I shall attempt to describe below), but at least one could not accuse the interpreter of being random. In the particular case of modern poetry, however, interpretation often depends on the randomness of word-association.

Let us consider for example the opening of Lorca's 'El rey de Harlem' ('The king of Harlem') from his *Poeta en Nueva York*:

Con una cuchara,
arrancaba los ojos a los cocodrilos
y golpeaba el trasero de los monos.
Con una cuchara.[9]

With a spoon, he tore out the crocodile's eyes and beat the monkeys on their bottoms. With a spoon.

Derek Harris asserts that this passage presents a 'considerable puzzle'.[10] The word 'puzzle' is a significant choice. It points to a process that will govern

the approach to the poem: difficulty and solution. For the critic–decoder the more a passage resists explanation by paraphrase the greater the need to illuminate and to define. Undaunted by the challenge Harris sets out to solve the puzzle:

> This is an incantatory, almost magical, statement centred on the African animals of the Zoo. Crocodiles are associated with death in the New York poems, and their blinding may thus be taken to represent a defeat for death. Monkeys are a traditional symbol of trouble, while in Christian symbology they stand for sin, lasciviousness, malice, the base condition of man, and even for the Devil. Their chastisement seems to indicate another defeat for negative forces. The spoon is perhaps an image of the King's sceptre, diminished in status. (p. 32)

I think it is possible to pinpoint the error of an approach like this in such a way that the objection is not based on either theory or taste. The misconception arises from a questionable critical method, specifically the outcome of an inordinate focus on two images – the crocodiles and the monkeys. Harris attributes to them characteristics ('death', 'trouble', 'sin', etc.) on the basis of (i) imprecise cross-referencing which could be auto-referential, (ii) traditional symbolism and (iii) Christian symbology. Both images are negated (Harris's understanding of 'arrancaba los ojos' and 'golpeaba') hence the 'defeat for negative forces' whatever these may be. Although Harris's statement has the requisite quality of definition, it is, however, on the basis of word-association rather than context. In his fixation on what he decides to be the two key terms he prefers to explore outside the text rather than address what is inscribed within it. He has in the process inverted Wittgenstein's injunction: 'Don't look for the meaning of a word, look for its use.' Consequently he has nothing to say about the incongruities in the text: that a spoon not a knife should be used as the instrument of aggression; that the king of Harlem, of African origin, should be attacking, even if in an inept and comical fashion, creatures with whom he has a kinship. Such a response to the text does not clarify in terms of solving a puzzle but that would be a shortcoming only if we regard poems as little more than riddles. The kind of wondering into which I am led, however, represents an attempt to reflect what happens as a result of the text, what comes out of it. It departs from expectations articulated as questions (e.g., should a king be doing this?) and thus locates contradictions. In short all it defines is the likely knowledge and curiosity of the reader about to embark on the fifth line of the poem. This has been achieved by an awareness of what the poem *has done*, not on the basis of what the poem *has supplied* by way of extractable material. It is a mode of understanding that does not depend upon the inevitable arbitrariness of noun-based deciphering; it has, in short,

involved responding to the actions rather than the objects in the narrative of the text.

Let us now look again at Machado's 'El hospicio' and apply a similarly reader-centred approach. The first two stanzas describe the poorhouse from outside; the opening with its deictic intent ('Ah, here's the poorhouse') suggests both a narrator–observer, an implicit first-person presence, and an addressee. The last two stanzas, however, supply an opposite perspective: the eyes are of those within looking out. An awareness of this switch sharpens the reader's perception of the inmates' plight. The move from building to people and from institution to experience yields both a sense of compassion that is emphasized in the pathos of the third stanza and a recognition that compassion is denied in the play on 'tierra fría' and 'fría tierra' – a cold (frozen) earth because it is snowing and a cold (callous) earth because it is uncaring. The contrast of past and present – the crux of Predmore's historical interpretation – does not therefore figure in the development of the poem except as an accompanying irony: the fortress, which was a stronghold, has now become an asylum for the weak and unfortunate. What a historical reading does, rather as Harris does with 'El rey de Harlem', is to extract details and explore them out of context, and thereby sacrifice the fuller awareness of what the poem has made us do. Stanley Fish reminds us that it is easy 'to surrender to the bias of our critical language and begin to talk as if poems, not readers or interpreters, did things'.[11] Let us now consider the effect of such a statement by reference to Lorca's 'Aire de nocturno' from *Libro de poemas*:

Tengo mucho miedo
de las hojas muertas,
miedo de los prados
llenos de rocío.
Yo voy a dormirme;
si no me despiertas,
dejaré a tu lado mi corazón frío.

'¿Qué es eso que suena
muy lejos?'
'Amor,
el viento en las vidrieras,
¡amor mío!'

Te puse collares
con gemas de aurora.
¿Por qué me abandonas
en este camino?
Si te vas muy lejos
mi pájaro llora

y la verde viña
no dará su vino.

'¿Qué es eso que suena
muy lejos?'
'Amor,
el viento en las vidrieras,
¡amor mío!'

Tú no sabrás nunca,
esfinge de nieve,
lo mucho que yo
te hubiera querido
esas madrugadas
cuando tanto llueve
y en la rama seca
se deshace el nido.

'¿Qué es eso que suena
muy lejos?'
'Amor,
el viento en las vidrieras,
¡amor mío!'[12]

I am very frightened of the dead leaves, frightened of the meadows full of dew. I am going to fall asleep; if you don't wake me I will leave my cold heart at your side. 'What is it that sounds far away?' 'Love, the wind on the glass, my love!' I put necklaces with dawn gems on you. Why do you abandon me on this road? If you go far away my bird weeps and the green vine will not yield its wine. 'What is it that sounds far away?' 'Love, the wind on the glass, my love!' You will never know, sphinx of snow, how much I would have loved you on those dawns when it rains so much and the nest is broken on the dry branch. 'What is it that sounds far away?' 'Love, the wind on the glass, my love!'

There are different presences in this poem, deriving from a first-person controlling voice and an addressee suggesting two identities. The incorporation of direct speech in the guise of a refrain adds to the complexity. The first task is to locate, partly by disentangling, the various voices or presences.

Initially we encounter a child-like attitude: the unfounded fear (why be afraid of the leaves and the meadow?), the worried question in the refrain, the focus on basic activities (sleeping, waking, going away), the sense of insecurity (the subject abandoned on the road). All of this is enunciated in an appropriately direct and simple language. Midway through the poem, however, another voice is perceived: that of the lover. At first this is ill-defined, marked by the abstract terms 'corazón' and 'amor'. In the third and final strophe, however, it emerges clearly, and effectively supplants the

child-like voice of the opening. It is a reproach that unexpectedly evokes the terminology of Medieval or Renaissance love poetry: the rebuke and appeal to an indifferent female object – 'esfinge de nieve' ('sphinx of snow').

For these differing subject voices there is but a single response from the addressee: the second part of the refrain – ' "Amor, / el viento en las vidrieras, / ¡amor mío!" ' ('Love, / the wind on the glass, / my love!'). This is clearly (or as clearly as anything could be in this poem) a reassurance to the curious and troubled questioner. To the child-subject these words are those of a mother. The refrain itself, however, is intriguing because it supplies a constant message while the principal strophes embody the changes of addressee and attitude. Moreover, although the origin of the response is maternal, its detail is sufficiently protean to cover the poem's dual emotional configuration. The sound in the distance is both the wind rattling the windows and, in a word, love. Two replies, in effect, but a single voice: tender and consoling, and solely indicative of the motherly presence. It would be inappropriate to attribute to the sphinx of snow the endearment at the end of the refrain.

Having identified, indeed isolated, two likely female presences we could now locate areas where there is ambivalence. The close of the first strophe has within it the abrupt shift from the child's simple utterance – 'Yo voy a dormirme' ('I am going to fall asleep') – to the abstraction of 'corazón' ('heart'). The qualification of 'corazón' as 'frío' ('cold'), however, seems inappropriate for the subject, whether as child or would-be lover, though we will subsequently deem it appropriate for the remote beloved. Additionally, the opening of the second main strophe hints at an idealization – 'Te puse collares' ('I put necklaces on you') – that smacks of a child's disarming endearment as much as of a lover's devotion. We are now starting to wander into the area where we read symbolically, and it is at this stage that a decision about the understanding of the poem might be made.

Interpreting or decoding readers may take their cue from the symbolic implications of the phrase at the start of the second strophe and embark on further 'discoveries'. Before doing this, however, it is very likely that a choice about the poem's meaning or subject will have been made, if only unconsciously. This may well require an unequivocal answer to the question 'with which of the two loves does the poem deal?' – an answer that will compel elimination. This is a process that will not be necessarily recognized as such for habits of interpretation dull the awareness of what we do when we read, whereby what is recognized is outcome – a product rather than a process. The answer to such a question would be without fail erotic love, but what I query is that it should be 'without fail' especially if we keep in mind what the poem *is*, as suggested by my opening comments on the piece, while I have not yet seriously considered what the poem

does. There are, I hazard, two reasons for such a definitive, unqualified answer. One derives from the fact that it comprises the final impression of the poem read as a sequential unfolding – in other words it is what is at the end, and because of that we deem it to be the poem's end, that is, its objective – and it becomes the abiding impression. The second reason is a matter of custom and practice; I am tempted to say an understanding by default. Most love poems are concerned with erotic love; most of these are about heterosexual love relations; and of these the majority convey an experience that is negative or unfulfilled. The present poem passes all these tests, but an unchallenged expectation has been allowed to become the poem's theme, its foundation.

And on this base a further and familiar process of analysis can now take place. With the erotic scenario in mind the critic is free to 'see the meaning' 'behind the words', 'below the surface' or some such phrase; it is a task that leads towards paraphrase and word-substitution. Let us imagine how it might be with 'Aire de nocturno'. The vine that will not yield wine and the destroyed nest on the dry branch will be read as metaphors of a failed love. There is nothing objectionable about such a reading in itself but it is conducive to a doubly suspect process of understanding. On the one hand it may encourage further and more fanciful decoding whose only validity will be that it is part of the 'general picture', that it fits in with the approach adopted. It will, however, have been forgotten that this 'picture' is the unidimensional one that the critic has extracted from the poem rather than one that recognizes the plural voices and presences within it. In this vein, too, the dead leaves will be categorized with the barren vine and the broken nest as another instance of pathetic fallacy – human emotions reflected in or projected upon inanimate objects – and, consequently, its more immediate, though problematic, point of contact with the image of the dewy meadows will be overlooked. It almost goes without saying that within this interpretive frame the weeping bird can supply the statutory phallic symbol.

What such an interpretation also does, however, is to betray what has been the experience of responding to the poem. For rather than making sense by *completing* the poem we would be imposing meaning by *amending* it. This is ironic, for while decoders may imagine that interpretation offers freedom (hence such observations as 'many interpretations are possible' and 'this is ambiguous') it is an illusory freedom for they are slaves to a way of reading that is restricted by the requisites of the symbolic understanding and, often, of preconception. The outcome of this approach is to sell the poem short because it has rejected what was valid, even troubling, in an intial response. It fails to acknowledge what Stanley Fish has defined as the kinetic quality of literature; it is a kind of criticism that forgets that as we read a

book both it and we are moving: the pages turning, the lines receding into the past.

Instead of an interpretation based on 'forgetting', that is elimination, however, one could envisage another, based on incorporation. The cue for this could be the occasional amalgamation of the maternal and the erotic, and its extension so that the alternation of the two loves becomes in this reading a fusion. This supplies the critic with a ready-made solution to the poem in the form of an Oedipal interpretation. One of the problems with this is that it is a *solution*. It treats the *text* (as distinct from the larger concept of the poem) as somehow defective, or incomplete *as text*, and confers a unity upon it. What is registered as plural and incompatible is filtered into a single subject that is an *integration*. So what is the warrant for this leap? Nothing other than the neatness afforded by the structural convenience of joining two disparate elements and the attraction of applying to a poet who was homosexual an interpretation that derives from an understanding (there may not be sufficient ancillary detail to call it a reading) of the psychology of Freud.

The sense I acquire in the poem, however, is not at all about reduction or integration. It is about separateness and incongruity, and the sense that I make of it demands that I acknowledge its uncertainty and its actual *confusion* rather than its presumed *fusion*. This confusion resides not in the attempt to describe the nature of the elements – the two loves, maternal and sexual – but in the attempt to reconcile them. The crucial point is this: the attempt does not need to be successful. This is where I take leave from the orthodoxy of New Critics, who were preoccupied with unity and integrity and not averse to taking short cuts to achieve these desired goals. To admit to failure in an effort at combining the two elements, however, will no less enable us to achieve an understanding of the poem: one that, in my view, better relates to the experience of reading it – the sense of the text.

What is clear too is that this sense is as much a result of our intervention, of our making, as any interpretation, however ingenious it may be. The text supplies fragments of emotional relationships in the form of statements and dialogue. These scraps allow us to perceive the incompatibility of the two loves. One of these is real insofar as it belongs to the present or the past; the other is remote (the 'muy lejos' of the refrain), a thing of the future at most. Put more emphatically, there is a love that has gone or that will shortly go (as the child grows up) and a love which, through its conventional formulation, does not exist and may never be. One can envisage a virtual presence that partakes of these two loves, a poetic subject that experiences both, but in a limited fashion. It is an experience that is ill-formed, unclear, and that lacks the security of definition. A textually analytical description could supply a quantification, essentially a localization, of characteristics.

Only in the unsuccessful struggle for meaning as integration, however, is the experience of disturbance and uncertainty realized. This is not inscribed in the text as substance in the form of images, but is fulfilled in the act of reading whereby we have made sense of the poem.

I offer as an analogy to my observations on the Lorca poem a comparison of two public notices: 'Members only' and 'Guide dogs only'. If we subject these to a textual analysis we see that both involve restriction and are identically formulated: noun plus adverb plus verb understood ('are allowed'). Read purely in these terms, however, what could we conclude? That only members would have access in the case of the former and only guide dogs in the latter. Of course we know that the latter example has a further, unstated qualification: the only kind of dog that is allowed is a guide dog. This knowledge, however, is not in the text as formulated but in our *completion* of the text. We achieve the proper understanding because we are endowed with the capacity for making the leap, for coping with the apparently shorthand version of the message. Such a gift would commonly be called common sense; more specifically the sense that the phrase possesses is made common by the readers of the notice. If it were left to the text alone what we would have would be a nonsense.

The intervention of readers in literary texts is not as seemingly dramatic as this retrieval of sense from non-sense. The alert reader, however, can at the very least enhance a text by the realization of its meaning. Let us consider a passage from Luis de León's 'Vida retirada'. Typically for the sixteenth century it is based on a classical source, the *Odes* of Horace, upon which is grafted the topical theme of the scorn of the city and the praise of the country. The poem is made up of a series of contrasts and antitheses, often in a structurally balanced fashion whereby the exposition of a positive quality will be succeeded by an equal space of text dedicated to the negative one. As a consequence, as we read through the poem we are conditioned to expect a process of alternation. Midway through the poem there is a stanza that describes the poet in his rural idyll:

> Del monte en la ladera,
> por mi mano plantado, tengo un huerto,
> que con la primavera,
> de bella flor cubierto,
> ya muestra en esperanza el fruto cierto.[13]
>
> On the side of the mountain, planted by my own hand, I have a garden, which shows in the Spring, covered with beautiful flowers, the certain fruit as a sign of hope.

We might well now be awaiting the riposte, and indeed when we read the next two lines our expectations would seem to have been fulfilled:

y, como codiciosa
de ver y acrecentar su hermosura.

and, greedy as it is to see its beauty increase.

A word like 'codiciosa' seems tailor-made for all that is negative about the city or court, suggestive as it is of worldliness and self-seeking, while 'hermosura' will imply in this context a vain, perishable beauty. These two lines, however, have not yet supplied the noun to which the feminine adjective 'codiciosa' refers. The following line – 'desde la cumbre airosa' ('from the proud peak') – continues to deny us the information we seek; indeed the adjective 'airosa' could be read as a hint of the pomp of court life. Finally, and by now surprisingly, we discover that the subject is a fountain – a positive element from the dichotomy:

desde la cumbre airosa
una fontana pura
hasta llegar corriendo se apresura.

from the proud peak a pure fountain quickens its pace and arrives running.

Such a false trail is not without its purpose. If we extract the conflicting ideas from the poem then they can be represented in terms of a straightforward opposition. To carry out such a structural reduction, however, would be to overlook the character of the voice that speaks through the poem. At the end there appears to be an undisturbed contentment, certainly if we were to extract and list the images that are employed:

A mí una pobrecilla
mesa de amable paz bien abastada
me baste, y la vajilla
de fino oro labrada
sea de quien la mar no teme airada.

Y mientras miserable-
mente se están los otros abrasando
con sed insaciable
del no durable mando,
tendido yo a la sombra esté cantando.

A la sombra tendido,
de hiedra y lauro eterno coronado,
puesto el atento oído
al son dulce acordado,
del plectro sabiamente meneado.

(p. 74)

> Let a poor little table well stocked with pleasant peace be enough for me, and let the plate worked in fine gold belong to him who does not fear the angry sea. And while others are burning in their misery with an insatiable thirst for the authority that does not last, let me sing as I lie in the shade. Stretched in the shade and crowned with ivy and eternal laurel, with my ear listening closely to the sweet measured sound of the skilfully plucked lute.

Merely to tot up the positive images, however, would not properly represent the poet's state of mind: the scene is not how things are but how the poet would wish them to be – an aspiration rather than a reality. As a result the voice is anxious, not complacent, as these are not the lines of a smug moralist, secure in his superior condition. The effect of the surprise attendant upon the presentation of the fountain image thus operates to a similar end. It instils a matching insecurity in readers, denying them the certainty of the clear-cut distinction and alternation. It raises doubts, and results in a momentary need for readjustment that contributes to an experiencing of the poem that involves a process of emotional response allied to reasoning that is close to that of the poet at the end. It is a salutary reminder that to define the poem as a clash of values would be inadequate; the poem is rather about the *response* to such a clash. Moreover, it is a response to which the reader has contributed.

We are now a long way from the conception of the reader as a passive presence that we take for granted. We have also seen how the reader's contribution to the poem (as distinct from the text) can take different forms. In the case of Lorca's 'Aire de nocturno' the reader's inability to achieve a definition adds to the uncertainty and darkness of the poem; with 'Vida retirada' the tentative way in which we assimilate detail matches the poet's insecurity and uncertainty. The mimetic implications of the reader's involvement in these poems is even more pronounced in the first paragraph of a poem from *En las orillas del Sar* by Rosalía de Castro (1837–85):

> Del antiguo camino a lo largo,
> ya un pinar, ya una fuente aparece,
> que brotando en la peña musgosa
> con estrépito al valle desciende.
> Y brillando del sol a los rayos
> entre un mar de verdura se pierden,
> dividiéndose en limpios arroyos
> que dan vida a las flores silvestres
> y en el Sar se confunden, el río
> que cual niño que plácido duerme,
> reflejando el azul de los cielos,
> lento corre en la fronda a esconderse.[14]

> Along the old path, now a pine grove, now a fountain appears, which bursting forth on the mossy rock descends noisily to the valley. And shining in the rays of sun between a sea of greenery are lost, split in limpid streams that give life to the wild flowers and joining together in the Sar, the river which like a child who sleeps peacefully, reflecting the blue of the skies, flows slowly to be hidden in the foliage.

This is a poem evocative of the poet's native Galician landscape, here perceived at its most enchanting. But 'discovered' might be a better description than 'perceived'. The old path referred to in the first line leads to the traditionally magical location of a fountain and later to a river that divides into various tributaries. If this, however, describes the content of the paragraph I have quoted it does little justice to how we absorb it. Much is made of the secrecy of the location, set deep in the woods. Verbs such as 'se pierden' ('are lost'), 'esconderse' ('to be hidden') and even 'aparece' ('appears'), indicative of something that has been suddenly stumbled upon, hint at the remoteness and inaccessibility of the place. Once again, however, the reader's involvement is not confined to such textual tasks: more than the reception of a message it will entail participating in the poem's unfathomability. This process is centred on what is likely to be a difficulty of comprehension in the long sentence that begins in line 5. We may tentatively admit that the subject of 'se pierden' must be the pine grove and the fountain mentioned in line 2. This is grammatically, at least, a possible solution though on reflection it is not the logical one, because while a fountain can be lost in a sea of green, it is hard to see how a pine grove could, most obviously because it is itself likely to be the sea of green. Moreover, the later part of the first sentence (lines 3–4) clearly refers to the fountain alone because of the use of a verb in the singular – 'desciende' ('descends'). We might then reject the connection of 'se pierden' to the nouns in line 2 and await the appearance of the subject after the verb as commonly happens in Spanish. Indeed the appearance of a gerund – 'dividiéndose' ('dividing itself/themselves') – immediately after the verb suggests that the actions suggested by these two parts of speech are connected not only because of the syntactic link but also a semantic one; as they are divided they become lost. Such an understanding, however, would of course require a plural subject and when a subject appears it is a singular one: 'el río' ('the river'), two lines below. We are as a consequence forced to rethink our syntactical understanding and readjust our mental picture. 'Se pierden' does after all refer to the pine grove and the fountain; the gerund is not linked to the immediately preceding verb but to the one that has the river as its subject, that is 'corre' ('flows'), no fewer than five lines below. The reader thus undergoes a process that mimics the likely venturer into the wood: taking a wrong turning, losing the way and eventually chancing upon the desired location. The confusion to which we are subject is inscribed in

as many words in the text, in the verb 'se confunden' ('are confused'), which refers to how the tributaries will be absorbed into the larger river, the Sar.

So, the meaning of the poem – if we can so reduce it – will not be the outcome of the search but the search itself. Or, to put it another way, while the syntactical and grammatical senses of the poem require an effort on our part, but one that ultimately yields a solution, the poem is more than that solution: it is also about the effort. To forget what the discovery has demanded of us would be a perverse deprivation as it would be to deny an essential part of the poetic experience of this particular piece. Nobody would claim that the act of appreciating a poem was comparable to an arithmetical calculation but if we do not acknowledge what has gone into the process of understanding – how it has been for us, what it has meant for us – then that is what we are in danger of doing. Or, as Luis Cernuda, one of the most acute poet-critics of his generation, put it, using the same image as Castro does in the poem we have just examined: 'el poema no debía dar sólo al lector el efecto de mi experiencia, sino [conducirle] por el mismo camino que yo había recorrido, por los mismos estados que había experimentado' ('the poem ought not merely to have supplied the reader with the effect of my experience, but [to have led him] along the same path that I had trod, through the same states that I had experienced').[15] In this connection let us compare two real-life situations. The first envisages someone engaged in a calculation of a trial-and-error nature as one frequently is when buying something. For example: I have a sum of £50 and need to know how many items I could buy at £7.25 each. I initially estimate seven, and then discover, after performing the precise calculation, that it is in fact six. Unless it is something on which I had particularly set my heart, then I am content with the solution, or put another way, *the solution is what matters*. The trial-and-error process is a means, the details of which can be forgotten as soon as completed. Let us consider another event, however. I am travelling on a plane and there is a lot of turbulence. At this point I hear the sounds of the musical chime indicating that a message is about to be relayed. The message goes as follows: 'We are sorry to tell you (*pause*) that it has been necessary for us (*pause*) to cancel the in-flight movie.' Another wrong impression – but we do not as easily dismiss the experience of the erroneous expectation in this case as we would with the miscalculation. The traveller's anxiety was unfounded: it was a momentary panic. It would, however, form a part of the memory of that flight in a way that the incorrect calculation when making the purchase would not remotely approach. Indeed we would conclude that the anxiety was the most real and vivid experience of that flight.

If anyone were to be asked which of these occurrences supplied the better analogy for the impact that poetry has, there would doubtless be unanimous agreement that it would be the traveller's because it possessed

an emotional dimension unlike in the case of the buyer. When critics, however, speak of a poem's meaning or, as we have seen, of solving the problems posed by a poem, they are unknowingly engaged in an exercise similar to our purchaser making a calculation. This involves rejecting what does not contribute to what they understand to be the purpose of the poem. Whenever there is a definition of, or sometimes a conclusion about, a poem, it will entail an elimination of that part of the experience – and even that part of the text that provokes the experience – that is unnecessary or complicating for the formulation of such a statement. Over-interpreters invariably forget, through either will or habit, what has brought them to the point of statement. As readers they are, in both senses of the word, partial. Or it may be that they do not consider themselves readers as such; indeed the existence of the term 'ordinary reader' is telling in this regard. What this chapter has sought to explore, however, is the inappropriateness of the distinction between the 'ordinary' reader and the 'extraordinary' interpreter. What the poems examined in this chapter require are readers who participate, readers who make the effort. Only with this intervention can the implications and potential of the text be realized; only with this involvement can the poem be fully *made*.