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INTRODUCTION

'THE BRILLIANT PLEIAD'

A little group of wise hearts is better than a wilderness of fools.
John Ruskin, *Crown of Wild Olive*

The contributors to the lively magazine *Lola*, which appeared in Spain in 1928 and 1929, ended their collective pieces with a signature as playful as it was appropriate: 'The Brilliant Pleiad'. My aim in borrowing this label is to celebrate a unique generation of poets and not to compete with the names by which it is generally known: 'The Generation of 1927', 'The Generation of 1925' and 'The Generation of the Dictatorship'. It is easier to dismiss the last two for capriciousness and to criticize the first for magnifying the significance of Luis de Góngora's tercentenary than to find a better label. As Jorge Guillén has wisely pointed out, 'Any name seeking to give unity to a historical period is the invention of posterity... No label is convincing...'[1]

What matters is less an apt and generally acceptable name than the existence of a group of distinguished and distinctive poets who were never fused by a programme into a clearly defined school. The novels, short stories, memoirs, plays and critical essays which I list in the appendix provide ample evidence of the enterprise and versatility which made the poetry of this generation admirably varied in theme, mood, form and language. Rafael Alberti (1902–) in particular moved with masterful ease from manner to manner; his first works, *Marinero en tierra* (1924) and *La amante* (1925), identified him as a poet who, absorbed in Spanish poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, could skilfully emulate the verbal artifice of Góngora and the buoyant lyricism of Spain's popular songs.

It was in *La amante* that Alberti radiated most infectiously the joy which was the mainspring of the ecstatic but precise *Cántico* (1928) of Jorge Guillén (1893–) and which Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) expressed in an equally strong echo of Spain's popular poetry in *Primeras canciones* (1922) and *Canciones* (1921–4).

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Until the emotional disturbances which preceded and erupted in *Poeta en Nueva York* (1929–30), Lorca transposed into captivating rhythms and striking verbal pictures the contact of his senses with the superficially attractive world around him: the picturesque landscape of his native Andalusia in *Poema del cante jondo* (1921) and the flamboyant gipsy life in *Romancero gitano* (1924–7).

A roughly simultaneous emotional and spiritual crisis released Alberti from the stranglehold of formal and linguistic beauty which, according to his own recollections, almost petrified his feelings in *Cal y canto* (1926–7),[1] where, in a dazzling display of the techniques he learned from Góngora, he gave elegant shape and expression to the technical innovations delighting people in the 1920s. In *Sobre los ángeles* (1927–8) and *Sermones y moradas* (1929–30) he was forced to express a complex and indefinable crisis in dense images, which challenge our imaginations as forcefully as those of Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* and Vicente Aleixandre's *Pasión de la tierra* (1928–9), *Espadas como labios* (1930–1) and *La destrucción o el amor* (1932–3). The formal moulds which Aleixandre (1898–) adopted in *Ámbito* (1924–7) could no longer contain his rapturous, excited visions of the oneness of the universe, which spilt into a breathless, proliferating parade of visions and images.

After choosing the discipline of verse patterns in *Perfil del aire* (1927) and *Égloga, elegía, oda* (1927–8), Luis Cernuda (1902–63) relaxed the form of his poems at the same time that he accepted in *Un río, un amor* (1929) and *Los placeres prohibidos* (1931) the stimulus of surrealist freedom in order to describe his bitterness in and alienation from a world he found hostile. With his active imagination and constant search for new techniques, Cernuda described solitude in a much more varied and graphic way than Pedro Salinas (1892–1951), Emilio Prados (1899–1962) and Manuel Altolaguirre (1905–59), who remained as faithful to their manners as they did to their dominant preoccupations. With his playful visions, verbal games and carefully cultivated colloquial style, Salinas viewed life—in *Seguro azar* (1924–8) and *Fábula y signo* (1931) especially—with more humour and humanity than Altolaguirre, who narrated his loneliness in sober, uncoloured state-

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ments which changed little from *Las islas invitadas y otros poemas* (1926) to *Nuevos poemas de las islas invitadas* (1936). Because he reacted against it or created new visions of it, Salinas was more aware of the outside world than Prados, whose ecstatic repetitions and exclamations—particularly in *Cuerpo perseguido* (1927–8)—plotted a relentless flight from the body into an exclusive world of private thoughts and sensations.

'The Brilliant Pleiad' abounded in numbers as well as in achievements; although Alberti, Aleixandre, Altolaguirre, Cernuda, Lorca, Guillén, Prados and Salinas stood out as its most accomplished poets and so dominate the pages of this book, they were surrounded by writers who helped to reflect or mould the tastes and techniques of their age. For that reason, the poetry of the eight poets I single out for special attention will be seen not detached from but in conjunction with the work of Dámaso Alonso, Mauricio Bacarisse, José Bergamín, Juan Chabás, Juan-José Domenchina, Antonio Espina, Pedro Garfias, Ernesto Giménez Caballero, José María Hinojosa, Vicente Huidobro, Juan Larrea, José Moreno Villa, Guillermo de Torre and Gerardo Diego, whose effortlessly varied and fluent poetry carried less weight than his collaboration in the homage to Góngora, his publication of the magazines *Carmen* and *Lola* and his compilation in 1932 of his famous anthology, *Poesía española 1915–1931*.

With his passion for Góngora on the one hand and his fondness for French poetry on the other, Diego illustrates the open-mindedness of a generation of poets not hamstrung by doctrinaire tastes who looked backwards to Spain's literature and outwards to Europe, particularly France. The frequent mentions of and tributes to Baudelaire and Rimbaud, for example, are not invitations to trace their mark on the poetry of this generation, but a pointer to spiritual affinities and technical models which matter more than verbal reminiscences. While Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* impressed Guillén as 'an organic unity',[1] it marked for Alberti the influx into modern poetry of 'The disagreeable, the ugly, the wounding, the cruel, the fetid, the atrocious.'[2] Fond of the 'ascetic sparseness' of Pierre Reverdy, Cernuda censured the devotees of Paul Valéry, who included Guillén, as 'snobs'.[3] What is

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clear is that the poets of this generation, whether they read because they wanted to or, in the case of university teachers like Dámaso Alonso, Cernuda, Guillén and Salinas, because they needed to, illustrated in their works and exhibited in their reminiscences, statements and critical essays a vigorous curiosity and a breadth of tastes that were by no means uniform.

This generation found in Spanish poetry much to admire and emulate. Proud of a hispanic pedigree that started in the thirteenth century, Guillén has written that the 'fathers' of his generation are to be found 'from Gonzalo de Berceo to Rubén Darío and his descendants. . . Góngora did not exclude St John of the Cross or Lope—or Bécquer'.[1] When Alberti needed a model of lyrical gaiety, he turned enthusiastically to the prolific poet and playwright Lope de Vega (1562–1635), who reproduced in many of his poems and plays the simple words and lively rhythms of popular songs. When Alberti sought a poetic ancestor of the malaise he recorded in *Sobre los ángeles*, he resorted to Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836–76), whose *rimas* were of a fragile, tender and timeless simplicity, and whose legends were the products of a 'lucid somnambulism'[2] foreshadowing the twentieth-century interest in mental freedom.

Sensitive to 'the verbal matter, the cadence and the rhythm' of Rubén Darío's poetry,[3] Aleixandre felt at the beginning of his career the explosive impact of the Nicaraguan diplomat and journalist, who from his first visit to Spain in 1892 stimulated by his pen and by his presence a new passion for poetry, which had stagnated in Spain in the late nineteenth century in the prim and pedestrian verses of Ramón de Campoamor (1817–1901) and Gaspar Núñez de Arce (1834–1903). Obsessed with 'the nobility of Art',[4] Darío (1867–1916) described in the exuberant language and resonant lines of *Azul* (1888) and *Prosas profanas* (1896) an aristocratic fairy-tale world peopled with mythological figures and adorned with what Cernuda censured as 'objects and things he considered previously "poetic": roses, swans, champagne, stars, peacocks, malachite, princesses, pearls, marchionesses, etc.'[5]

Darío's vigorous revitalization of Spanish poetry and his bold liberties with the metres and accentuation of verse marked him as

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a revolutionary whose achievements and aims set a standard for and challenged the sensibilities of the three figures who were in turn to become the spiritual mentors of a generation: Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936), Antonio Machado (1875–1939) and Juan Ramón Jiménez (1881–1958).

Jiménez's letters to Darío, whom he praised in 1904 as 'the only great poet at present in Spain',[1] demonstrated his respect for the conscious artistry and complete professionalism of Darío, whose dislike of Jiménez's melancholy did not prevent him from recognizing his delicate sensibility or admiring his pure perceptions. Jiménez and Antonio Machado accepted the stimulus and patronage of Darío without harm to their temperaments or their poetic integrity. Although Darío urged Jiménez in 1903 to 'conquer life',[2] Jiménez withdrew from life in order to immunize his sensations and perceptions against human contact. And, unlike the flamboyantly virile pose maintained by Darío, Machado opted for a rugged honesty, a candid intimacy which expressed his deep thoughts and authentic feelings in solemn rhythms and clear, sober language unrelieved by metaphor or image. Machado did not shrink from presenting himself in his writings as a lonely, crumpled figure because, as he wrote to Jiménez in 1903 or 1904, 'that is what I am'.[3]

As the title *Campos de Castilla* (1912) suggests, Machado was more open to and aware of the concrete world than Jiménez. Less interested in capturing sensations than in expressing feelings, thoughts and opinions, he created two academic figures, Abel Martín and Juan de Mairena, who explored in two books the meditative and epigrammatic vein which makes of Machado's poetry a bleakly moving narrative of one man's passage through life and meditations on time.

That most of the poets starting their careers in the 1920s looked up to Jiménez, Machado and Unamuno as poetic patrons is shown by Guillén's reminiscence that 'We admired Machado, Jiménez and Unamuno without reserve.'[4] Alberti, who resolved in 'Con él' of *Marinero en tierra* to sail from his birthplace, Puerto de Santa María, to Jiménez's home in Palos de Moguer, has described Jiménez and Machado as 'the poets most respected by recent

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generations of Spaniards.'[1] What Alberti's generation admired in Jiménez and Machado was their spiritual integrity and their complete dedication to the craft and calling of poetry. Altolaguirre, who wrote to Jiménez of his respect, debt and 'true silent friendship',[2] enclosed himself as tightly as his master in a cocoon of pure and private sensations. Salinas found in Jiménez an 'authentic poet'[3] who sought before him to ignore the body; Salinas's decision in *Fábula y signo* to

> Dejarte. Te dejaré
> como olvidada
> y pensando en otras cosas
> para no pensar en ti,
> pero pensándote a ti,* (p. 97)

duplicates the posture adopted by Jiménez, who stated in *Eternidades* (1916–17) that

> Ante mí estás, sí.
> Mas me olvido de ti
> pensando en ti.†[4]

The 'solitary pilgrim' who appeared in Dámaso Alonso's *Poemas puros. Poemillas de la ciudad* (1921),[5] where roses wither and a fountain slowly drips, perpetuated the sadness of Machado, whose 'caravanas de tristeza' moving through *Soledades* (1899–1907) reappeared in a poem Lorca wrote in 1918, 'Éste es el prólogo':

> En los libros de versos,
> entre rosas de sangre,
> van pasando las tristes
> y eternas caravanas...‡ (p. 508)

And when in *Libro de poemas* Lorca went

> ...camino de la tarde,
> entre flores de la huerta,

* Leave you. I shall leave you as if forgotten and think of other things not to think of you, but thinking you.
† Before me you stand, yes. But I forget you by thinking of you.
‡ In books of verses, among roses of blood, the sad and eternal caravans pass by.

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dejando sobre el camino
el agua de mi tristeza,* (p. 111)

or introduced into his poems a cricket, a water wheel, a poplar tree or a fading evening, he used the objects and settings favoured by Machado to create what the latter called a 'spectral background of generic and familiar images' against which to project his melancholy.[1]

When Lorca and his companions plumbed their imaginations to seek a manner that was personal and distinctive, their coining of images was interpreted by Unamuno as a pursuit of 'facile difficulty'[2] and by Machado as a betrayal of the intuition and human emotion essential in his view to the writing of poetry. Machado's acrid censure of 'the motley images of the very new poets',[3] which was in keeping with his assault on baroque poetry in *Abel Martín*,[4] revealed his failure to understand that the young poets for whom the early 1920s were a time of apprenticeship and experiment reacted to a complex of stimuli in which Góngora did not exclude Juan Ramón Jiménez, Max Jacob or James Joyce. While in *Romancero gitano* and *Cal y canto* Lorca and Alberti responded to the challenge of Góngora's poetry and emulated his technique of ennobling the commonplace, they were led by their own geniuses to write works that were individual and unmistakably theirs; Alberti required native talent to transform a moving train into a 'Galope de las férreas amazonas'† (p. 212); Lorca needed authentic imaginative power to visualize feverish kisses as

avispas y vientecillos
en doble enjambre de flautas.‡ (p. 394)

It was a profusion of images such as these that helped to make this generation into what Salinas once called a generation born 'under a lyrical star'.[5] The magazines which sprang up and died so fast in the 1920s that in a tart verse Unamuno explained every fire he saw as the quick extinction of a periodical[6] made lyrical fervour

* journeying towards the evening, among flowers of the fields, leaving the waters of my sadness on the way.
† Gallop of the iron amazons.
‡ wasps and breezes in a double swarm of flutes.

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and imaginative vitality into a national phenomenon whose growth was unstemmed by the disapproval of older critics like Eduardo Gómez de Baquero, who railed against 'a taste for cheap imagery'.[1] Madrid was only one centre of poetic activity; *Índice* (1921–2), published by Juan Ramón Jiménez, *La Gaceta Literaria* (1927–32) and *Los Cuatro Vientos* (1933) were accompanied in the provinces by *Alfar* (1921–5) in Corunna; *La Verdad* (1923–7) and *Verso y Prosa* (1927–8) in Murcia; *Mediodía* (1926–9) in Seville; *L'Amic de les Arts* (1926–8) in Sitges; *Papel de Aleluyas* (1927–8) in Huelva; *Gallo* (1928), published in Granada by Lorca; *Carmen* and its 'friend and supplement' *Lola* (1928–9), published in Gijón by Gerardo Diego; and, perhaps the most important of all, *Litoral* (1927–9), published in Málaga by Altolaguirre and Prados, whom Alberti has celebrated as 'the solitary heroes of the printing press'.[2] That their press was, as Altolaguirre has written, 'a real corner of poetry'[3] is amply demonstrated by the series of supplements whose titles are now part of the poetic history of a generation; among the first series appeared Alberti's *La amante*, Aleixandre's *Ambito*, Altolaguirre's *Ejemplo*, Bergamín's *Caracteres*, Cernuda's *Perfil del aire*, Lorca's *Canciones*, Hinojosa's *La rosa de los vientos* and Prados's *Vuelta*.

Guillén's description of *Verso y Prosa* in a letter to Lorca of 12 December 1926 as 'an exercise of friendship'[4] suggests that, apart from channelling into print the poetic fervour of a generation, magazines like *Verso y Prosa* and *Litoral* fertilized ideas and established personal contacts which were frequently to harden into firm friendships, attested by volleys of dedications and recorded in letters, tributes and reminiscences. The almost proverbial friendship of Altolaguirre and Prados was celebrated playfully by Lorca in one of his fanciful short plays, *La doncella, el marinero y el estudiante* (1928), when in a stage direction he introduced the two poets 'flour-white with fear of the sea' (p. 813); it was commemorated in a grimmer context by Altolaguirre, who in a chapter of his unpublished novel recalled his interrogation in France after his flight from Spain in 1939:

> One of the members of the tribunal knew me.
> He uttered my name. He asked me about my best friend...
> —Do you know where your friend Emilio Prados is?[5]

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When Guillén ended a letter to Lorca of 19 February 1926: 'Always yours, in Poetry and in Friendship',[1] he signalled an intimacy and a common dedication to poetry prevented by the savagery unleashed by the Civil War from enduring as long as the deep friendship of Guillén and Salinas. Even Cernuda, whose pathological shyness made personal contact difficult, found in Altolaguirre and Aleixandre, who were themselves firm friends, the comradeship and understanding he needed. Altolaguirre's wife, Concha Méndez, has recalled that Cernuda was 'like a brother of ours whom we saw daily for years and years'.[2] Cernuda's closeness to Aleixandre made him a frequent visitor to the latter's house, which was a hospitable place in which to talk, recite or listen to Lorca at the piano; it was a focal point of poetic fervour as lively and informal as the Residencia de Estudiantes, administered by the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, which counted among its residents at different times Lorca, Prados, Moreno Villa, Buñuel and Dalí. Alberti, who remembered many years later Lorca's spellbinding recital of his 'Romance sonámbulo' during their first meeting at the Residencia, has paid tribute to it as a 'house of culture', a 'retreat of poets' who exchanged ideas and enthusiasms, recited new poems, aired their poetic discoveries and listened to lectures by such distinguished men as Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard.[3]

Such a web of contacts provided stimuli to poetic activity more amiable, informal and unpredictable than any manifesto. As Guillén has recalled, 'There was no program, there was no manifesto attacking or defending fixed positions. There were dialogues, letters, dinners, walks, and friendship under the bright light of Madrid . . .'[4] Each poet maintained his individuality and displayed a distinctive manner despite frequent meetings and such communal activities as the homage to Góngora instigated by Alberti, Dámaso Alonso, Diego, Guillén, Lorca and Salinas, and the visit to the Ateneo of Seville made in December 1927 by Alberti, Bergamín, Chabás, Diego, Guillén and Lorca. The liberal use of the adjective *putrefacto*, invented by Dalí or Lorca, demonstrated a youthful zest perfectly compatible with a readiness to acknowledge literary debts and revere spiritual and poetic mentors. It was with playful

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mischief rather than malice that Lorca would repeat the line of Rubén Darío: 'Que púberes canéforas te ofrenden el acanto'* only to say: 'The only word I understand in all that is *que*.'[1]

José Ortega y Gasset's attack in *La deshumanización del arte*, written in 1925, on the cult of sport in life and literature, which in his view caused in poetry 'the superior algebra of metaphors',[2] was based on a valid diagnosis of the first half of the 1920s, when most poets of the younger generation seemed keen to display their imaginative litheness. Had Ortega turned particularly to the poetry of Alberti, Cernuda and Lorca four years later, he would have observed in their use of images the interplay of emotion and imagination which he could have diagnosed as *la rehumanización del arte*. But it was precisely Alberti's response in *Sobre los ángeles* to the personal pressures inside him that provoked Juan Ramón Jiménez's vicious assault in 1930 on his 'magic wand' and 'disjointed prattling'.[3] Jiménez's reluctance to allow the younger poets to develop in fidelity to their own temperaments and personalities made him swing from patronage to open hostility. Despite his claim in a letter to Alberti written about 1945 that his estrangement from the younger poets after 1927 was 'not my fault',[4] his refusal to take part in the homage to Góngora and his belief that Alberti was wasting his time on his nonsense play, *La pájara pinta* (1925), pointed to a queen-bee mentality which detached him from the younger poets as much as their growing assurance and individuality removed them from his spiritual control. Years later Alberti asked himself whether Jiménez was afraid of 'perhaps losing the baton and suddenly finding himself alone, without an orchestra, tracing signs in the air of an empty room?'[5]

With majestic fickleness Jiménez made waspish attacks on writers to whom he had earlier paid lyrical tributes. His description of Salinas in 1923 as 'a smiling, fair and ruddy' poet whose *Presagios* he exalted as 'a most beautiful mound of human fruit of shining gold and rich shadow', changed in his letters into bitter sniping at 'the opportunist'.[6] The affable formulas of 'My dear poet' and 'Your friend always' with which he began and ended his letter to Guillén of 7 August 1932 changed on 27 June 1933 into

* For pubescent canephores offer unto you the acanthus.

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