

Introduction

Origins and developments

Any historical survey of Spanish poetry will be confronted with the problem of origins. Only those histories that understand Spanish poetry as the poetry of Spain rather than poetry in the Spanish language have a clear point of departure: Martial and Lucan, poets of Roman Spain. If, however, we think of the distant sources of the traditional popular poetry that was written down from the Middle Ages then we might acknowledge that a kind of song may well have been in existence since the later Paleolithic period (30,000–15,000 BC), and thus contemporary with cave art, some of the finest examples of which are in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. To compound the problem, even the earliest written poetry in Ibero-Romance is by no means a clear-cut issue. The discovery in the mid twentieth century of poetic fragments written in Mozarabic, a Romance dialect employed by those Hispano-Romans who remained in Andalusia after the Moorish invasion of the Peninsula at the start of the eighth century, proved to be one of the most important developments in the literary history of the Middle Ages. According to those scholars responsible for this pioneering investigation, from around the tenth century poets of Al-Andalus (the name given to the Moorish lands of the south of Spain) wrote compositions entitled *muwashshas* in Classical Arabic, and later Hebrew, that contained a final section in Vulgar Arabic or Mozarabic. This tailpiece was called the *kharja* (literally ‘going away’). While Arabic scholars have pointed to the coherence of the poem as a whole because of a thematic connection between the *kharja* and the preceding material, the *kharjas*, by dint of their seeming linguistic divergence, have come to be regarded as brief compositions in their own right. Such brevity can lend these tiny love poems an intensity of emotion:

Vaise mio corachón de mib,
 ¡Ya Rab!, ¿si se me tornarad?
 ¡Tan mal me dóled *li-l-habib!*
 enfermo yed, ¿cuánd sanarad?¹

My heart goes away from me, oh God, will it return to me? So great is the pain for my lover! It is ill, when will it heal?

2 *The Cambridge Introduction to Spanish Poetry*

As the *kharjas* were written in Arabic letters, however, consequently no vowels are present, with the result that precise transcription is difficult and in some instances a matter of conjecture. Indeed so problematic is the very matter of deciphering that doubts have been expressed as to whether the passages are in a language that can be proved to be a derivative of the Latin spoken in the Iberian Peninsula.

Despite these reservations, however, a number of commentators have drawn attention to the similarities in theme and subject-matter between the *kharjas* and both the poetry produced in the north-western corner of the Peninsula in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the songs that appeared more widely in the Peninsula but which were only set down in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These connections betray a complexity that goes beyond the diversity of time and place and that again bears on the issue of what is the earliest poetry in Spanish. Of the three traditions that I have identified, only the last to be written down – the *villancicos* – is in Spanish. For the poetry written in the north-west of Spain in the Middle Ages is in Galician-Portuguese, not in Spanish; indeed it is now regarded as the first flowering of the lyric in Portuguese literature. The similarities of subject-matter and presentation, notably the incorporation of a female speaker, have led to speculation about a linear pattern of development in the Iberian Peninsula as a whole with similar origins and derivations. The fuller picture of early European lyric, however, suggests instead a confluence of traditions. If there was a single source it would be difficult to determine which it would be.

The issue of oral and written poetry likewise affects the epic. Only one such poem has survived in Spanish in a near-complete form, the *Poema* [or *Cantar*] *de mío Cid*, which was probably composed at the start of the thirteenth century. Evidence from chronicles and ballad-literature, however, suggests that there would have been a number of epics. Indeed it is likely that one such poem – the *Siete infantes de Lara* – dates from around 1000 and was revised three centuries later. A distinctive feature of the Spanish epic, certainly on the evidence of the *Poema de mío Cid*, was a blend of oral and written, or learned, elements. This text has perhaps provoked more controversy than any other in Spanish literature in recent decades. There has been a debate about the date of the poem, the status of the poet (was he a learned man – a lawyer or a cleric – or a semi-literate minstrel?), and the very identity of poet (does the name at the end of the manuscript refer to the author or merely a copyist?).

If the *Poema de mío Cid* is indeed an anonymous work then the first name in Spanish poetry is Gonzalo de Berceo (c.1196–1260?), a monk from the Rioja region, who lived in the first half of the thirteenth century. Even though Berceo was writing not long after the author of the epic poem, however,

his poetry reads and looks very differently. The metrical scheme employed in the epic – the *mester de juglaría* – is well suited to oral delivery with the division of each line into manageable units for performance. The verse-form depends on rhythmic pattern, on the number of rhythmic accents per line, or in some cases, perhaps, on the length of time per line required in the recitation of the verse:

De los sos ojos tan fuerte mientras lorando
tornava la cabeça y estava los catando.²

From his eyes such tears he shed, he turned his head and looked at them.

Contrast this with a stanza from Berceo's best-known work, the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*:

Davan olor sovejo las flores bien olientes,
refrescavan en omne las carnes e las mientes;
manavan cada canto fuentes claras corrientes,
en verano bien frías, en ivierno calientes.³

The sweet-smelling flowers perfumed abundantly, they refreshed the flesh and minds of men; from each corner there issued forth bright flowing fountains, so cool in summer, so warm in winter.

In this latter form – an example of *mester de clerecía* – the two halves of the line are uniformly of equal length unlike the oral or pseudo-oral form. It is not beat or rhythm but syllable count that is the determining factor: lines are made up of carefully counted syllables, each line comprising two hemistichs (half lines) of seven syllables each. There is, too, an unchanging rhyme-scheme (AAAA BBBB CCCC) whereas the epic had relied on assonance, achieved by the repetition of similar vowel sounds, and sometimes known as 'vocalic rhyme'. The stanza I have quoted from Berceo is perhaps a little untypical in that it is unusually euphonious on account of internal rhymes, including the opening words of the first three lines. The *cuaderna vía* (literally 'four-fold way') does not always guarantee such musical effects.

Berceo was not the first poet to employ this form: the anonymous *Libro de Alexandre* on the life of Alexander the Great is a slightly earlier work. The *cuaderna vía* metre was still being used a century later as the dominant form in the *Libro de buen amor* by Juan Ruiz, the Archpriest of Hita (1283? – 1350/1?), where it both performs a narrative function and supplies connective threads between a variety of other verse-forms.

A distinctive feature of poetry produced in the Christian kingdoms of Spain during the Middle Ages was linguistic choice. We tend nowadays to assume that language relates closely to nationality but in Castile until the late

4 *The Cambridge Introduction to Spanish Poetry*

fourteenth century genre rather than nationality was a determining factor. For lyric poetry it was Galician-Portuguese not Castilian that was employed. Thus while Berceo's essentially narrative *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* – a versification of a Latin prose text – was written in Castilian, the collection of songs composed at the court of Alfonso X and with the king's active participation, with a narrative element contained within the forms of the song, are accordingly in Galician-Portuguese. If lyric poetry in Spanish, however, was in a sense delayed, it was to flower in the fifteenth century mainly through the emergence of large compilations of songs known as *cancioneros*. The title itself (literally a 'collection of songs') suggests the predominantly lyrical nature of these compositions. Even though there is no Spanish poet of the period of the calibre of François Villon or the Catalan poet Ausiàs March the sheer number of practitioners – over 700 known authors – testifies to the vitality of the new Castilian lyric.

The *cancioneros* continued to be published into the sixteenth century; indeed the finest collection, the *Cancionero general*, compiled by Hernando de Castillo, was republished many times in the decades following its first edition in 1511. Shortly after the appearance of the *Cancionero general* another, however, more radical, development was to affect the evolution of Spanish poetry. The links between Spain and Italy, established mainly through Aragonese and Catalan political involvement during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, became stronger as a result initially of the foreign policy of the united crowns of Castile and Aragon and later of the territorial inheritances of Charles V. While Italian poetic forms had been previously introduced into the Peninsula on a modest scale by such poets as Francisco Imperial (mid fourteenth – early fifteenth century) and the Marqués de Santillana (1398–1458) it was only from the 1520s that what would be termed the Italianate manner – principally the adoption of the sonnet form and the hendecasyllabic line – became the norm. The pioneer was Juan Boscán (1487? – 1542), but it was the poetry of his friend Garcilaso de la Vega (1501/3–36) that set the standard by which poets of succeeding generations would be measured.

The Italianate influence on Spanish poetry is part of the larger process of the importation of Renaissance values and ideas. The revaluation of the legacy of Greece and Rome was evident in sixteenth-century poetry in a number of ways. The philosophical background informed not only the content of poetry but in addition the theory, notably Aristotle's theory of imitation. Poets also chose their classical predecessors as models, imitating their words and forms. A notable example was the cultivation of pastoral where the Eclogues of Theocritus and Virgil were avidly digested. Thus at the climax of Garcilaso's *Égloga tercera* there is a close imitation of a passage from Virgil's *Seventh Eclogue*:

Flérida, para mí dulce y sabrosa
 más que la fruta del cercado ajeno,
 más blanca que la leche y más hermosa
 que'l prado por abril de flores lleno⁴

Flérida, for me sweeter and tastier than the fruit in another's field, whiter than milk and more beautiful than the April meadow full of flowers

The use of classical mythology for illustration and metaphor was another common feature, with the result that the briefest of allusions could serve a shorthand or coded purpose, such as Midas for greed and Icarus for rashness. Such devices were a staple feature of the love poetry of the period where the dominant influence was not a classical writer but the fourteenth-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, known in English as Petrarch. A collection of his entitled *Canzoniere* was rediscovered and revalued in Italy at the start of the sixteenth century and soon became the most seminal work of the Renaissance and beyond. Both Petrarch and his earliest imitators became influential models that succeeding generations of poets, among them the poets of Golden Age Spain, would seek to imitate and emulate.

In the course of time so hackneyed did the characteristics of the Petrarchan manner become that in a quest for novelty poets were compelled to expand their range of linguistic and stylistic resources. For instance, one of the standard features of Petrarchan descriptions of the woman was that she had blonde hair. Countless poets of the Renaissance happily adhered to the ready-made analogy of hair as gold, but eventually it became a weak, if not a dead, metaphor. The opening lines of a sonnet by Francisco de Quevedo (1580–1645) indicate how the commonplace could be avoided. The description is of the lady with carnations in her hair:

Rizas en ondas ricas del rey Midas,
 Lisi, el tacto precioso, cuanto avaro;
 arden claveles en su cerco claro,
 flagrante sangre, espléndidas heridas.

Minas ardientes, al jardín unidas⁵

You curl in rich waves of King Midas, Lisi, the touch that is as precious as it is greedy; carnations burn in her bright ring, flagrant blood, splendid wounds. Burning mines, joined to the garden

The use of myth in the opening line illustrates its use as a code – Midas is linked to the lady's hair via the notion of gold. The fifth line, however, is more elaborate and unusual: 'mines' refers to the site of the gold and becomes a replacement metaphor though its phonetic similarity to the name 'Midas' encourages us to think of it as a coherent development rather than a mere flight of fancy.

6 *The Cambridge Introduction to Spanish Poetry*

This kind of variation and ornamentation is sometimes described as ‘baroque’, a term drawn from the visual arts and architecture and applicable when poetry deviates from the standard or symmetrical features of Renaissance structures. A further tendency of later Golden Age poetry was the emulation of the classical writers not only as formal and thematic but, more radically, as linguistic models: the aim was to approximate the Spanish language to Latin by lexical and syntactical means. The leading exponent of this practice known as *cultismo* was Luis de Góngora (1561–1627), perhaps the most controversial of all Spanish poets. He was admired and scorned in roughly equal measure; indeed his detractors coined the term ‘culterano’ to describe his style by analogy with the word ‘luterano’ (‘Lutheran’) which had a clearly negative resonance in Counter Reformation Spain. The Latinate quality of his longer poems is very evident as in these lines from the *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea* (‘Fable of Polyphemus and Galatea’). Striking in this description of the one-eyed Cyclops, Polyphemus, is the dislocation of syntax to the point where a demonstrative pronoun is separated from its noun by a three-line parenthesis:

Un monte era de miembros eminente
este (que, de Neptuno hijo fiero,
de un ojo ilustra el orbe de su frente,
émulo casi del mayor lucero)
cíclope⁶

An eminent mountain of limbs he was, this (the fearsome son of Neptune whose one eye, that almost emulates the greatest light, lights up the orb of his forehead) Cyclops

Much has been made of the rivalry between Góngora and Quevedo. This probably originated in personal antagonism and reciprocal poetic insults and was converted into a literary feud between Góngora’s *cultismo* and Quevedo’s *conceptismo* – that is, a particularly concentrated form of conceptual wit, such as the lines from the love sonnet quoted above; the term ‘wit’ describes the quality of mind that could produce conceits, and is applied to the so-called English Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century such as John Donne. In fact Quevedo is as capable of baroque pomp and the elevated manner as Góngora is of dense word-play and the ingenious metaphor. If there is a difference it is of degree, not of kind.

The *Penguin Book of Spanish Verse*, edited by J. M. Cohen (1960), contains no poetry written between the end of the seventeenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries. Although extreme and unjust, this omission embodies the low esteem in which Spanish poetry of this long period is generally held. Except for the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95) it is hard

to find a poet between 1650 and 1830 of the stature of half-a-dozen and perhaps more of the Golden Age. It would be simplistic to account for this falling-away in either historical or cultural terms. Neither the decline of Spain as a world power nor the growing dependency on French artistic norms with the emphasis on neo-classical adherence to rules and conventions, somehow felt to be alien to the way Spaniards did things, constitute adequate explanations. The decline of Spain is a complex historical issue and in terms of perceptible events is more pronounced at times outside this barren period: that is in the middle of the seventeenth century and at the end of the nineteenth. Again, having regard for the effect of the Italianate influence on sixteenth-century literature it would be rash to cite the foreignness of the French influence as a negative or inhibiting factor. Indeed it could be argued that the restraint and moderation that it offered might have served to animate a literary culture that had burnt itself out through the excesses of Góngora's lesser followers. We do not possess a theory which explains why the arts flourish in certain periods and wither in others; the most that can be asserted is that such mundane reasons as the conditions in which artists and writers have to work, and especially the presence of patronage, are likely to be more significant than speculations based on historical hindsight.

While Spanish poetry of the eighteenth century often bears a superficial similarity to that of the later Golden Age as a result of the imposing legacy first of Góngora, then of Quevedo, there are radical divergences. The neo-classical instinct for balance and clarity contrasts with the intricacy and ingenuity of baroque literature. The characteristics of European art, culture and thought of the eighteenth century are such that they led to designations like 'the Age of Reason' and 'the Enlightenment'. It is as though all shadows, both literal and metaphorical, have been dispelled, hence the predilection for moonlit landscapes, as in the 'Himno a la luna' by Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos (1744–1811):

Astro segundo de la ardiente esfera,
que en el espacio de la noche fría
suples la ausencia del radiante hermano,
fúlgida luna.

Tú, que la sombra disipando, sacas
plantas y flores del funesto caos,
volviendo al suelo, con tu luz dorada,
vida y colores⁷

Second star of the ardent sphere, who in the emptiness of the cold night,
replace the absence of your radiant brother, gleaming moon. You, who, as
you dispel the shadow, draw out plants and flowers from gloomy chaos,
restoring life and colours to the earth with your golden light

8 *The Cambridge Introduction to Spanish Poetry*

During the eighteenth century, too, there were the first manifestations of a shift in sensibility that would lead to a major upheaval in the arts. In some ways these traits, variously described as early Romantic or, in the case of Spain especially, pre-Romantic, represent a reaction against the optimism and radiance of the Enlightenment. The most striking manifestation in European as well as Spanish art is perhaps that embodied in an individual output, that of Goya. The certainty of the Age of Reason yields to doubt and scepticism, and shadows return to darken the landscape, as in a poem by Alberto Lista y Aragón (1775–1848):

¡Qué horror! La fiera noche
 ha triplicado el denegrido manto
 de tinieblas sin fin. Huyó del cielo
 el nocturno esplendor: no hay una estrella
 que con su yerta amortiguada lumbre
 hiera la oscuridad del firmamento.⁸

What horror! The fierce night has tripled the blackened cloak of endless darkness. The nocturnal splendour has fled from the sky: there is not a single star whose fixed, dim light could wound the blackness of the firmament.

The Romantic era was an especially fertile one for poetry in England, Germany and France. This was not so, however, in Spain where the poetry of the first half of the nineteenth century was of a considerably inferior quality; there is no Spanish poet of the period to compare with Shelley, Heine or Hugo. Cultural and historical circumstances – in particular the Peninsular War and the subsequent despotic rule of Ferdinand VII – again do not adequately explain the artistic poetic deficit, as it was in the decades straddling the turn of the nineteenth century that the extraordinary genius of Goya was to flourish. The contrast between the intellectual vitality of English poetry in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and Spanish poetry of the same period is glaring. It is possible, however, to take too negative a view of early Spanish Romantic poetry and disregard important minor poets. The *Romances históricos* of the Duque de Rivas (1791–1865) are significant because they re-establish the traditional Spanish ballad as a worthy vehicle of serious poetry. Rivas also was responsible for establishing the narrative poem as a favoured vehicle for poets who followed him.

Perhaps the greatest poem of the Spanish Romantic era is *El estudiante de Salamanca* by José de Espronceda (1808–42), a re-working of the Don Juan legend. This long narrative poem has many of the hallmarks of European Romanticism, most obviously the eerie setting with its pronounced atmosphere of Gothic horror:

Era más de medianoche,
 antiguas historias cuentan,
 cuando en sueño y en silencio
 lóbrego envuelta la tierra,
 los vivos muertos parecen,
 los muertos la tumba dejan.
 Era la hora en que acaso
 temerosas voces suenan
 informes, en que se escuchan
 tácitas pisadas huecas,
 y pavorosas fantasmas
 entre las densas tinieblas
 vagan y aúllan los perros
 amedrentados al verlas.⁹

It was later than midnight, the old tales relate, and with the earth enveloped in sleep and gloomy silence, the living seem as dead, and the dead leave the tomb. It was the time when fearful voices sound disembodied, when silent, hollow footsteps are heard, and terrifying ghosts wander among the deep shadows and dogs howl in horror when they see them.

The change of sensibility that Romanticism implied had a liberating effect on the formal and metrical features of Spanish poetry. This technical revolution can be well illustrated within the work of Espronceda. His earliest poetry is in the neo-classical vein as in this extract from a poem about night:

El arroyuelo a lo lejos
 más acallado murmura,
 y entre las ramas el aura
 eco armonioso susurra.¹⁰

The stream in the distance murmurs more silently, and between the branches the breeze whispers in harmonious echo.

This final phrase indeed could sum up Espronceda's poetry in this vein: it is smoothly flowing and symmetrical in form and design. In *El estudiante de Salamanca*, however, the range of verse-forms is immense, and determined by the subject and mood of what is being described. Thus the lines that describe the eponymous hero's death convey the last flickers of life in short, breathless lines, culminating in a single-word line that seems to embody physical collapse:

la frente inclina
 sobre su pecho,
 y a su despecho,
 siente sus brazos

10 *The Cambridge Introduction to Spanish Poetry*

lánguidos, débiles
 desfallecer.

(p.177)

He rests his head upon his chest, and despite himself he feels his languid,
 weak arms give way.

The narrative poem enjoyed such a vogue in the Romantic period that it was not only continued by later poets such as José Zorrilla (1817–93) but also left its mark on other genres. In the late 1850s and 1860s Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836–70), a Sevillian who had settled in Madrid, published a series of *leyendas* ('legends') that often appear like prose equivalents of the Romantic narrative poem. Indeed Bécquer's short stories are arguably, by dint of greater powers of description and evocation, more poetic than the verse equivalents of other poets. Bécquer, however, was the leading Spanish poet of the mid-century period. His verse, influenced by Andalusian folk-song and the lyrics of the German poet Heine, emerges as fresh and imaginative alongside the banal and overblown poetry of contemporaries such as Ramón de Campoamor (1817–1901) and Gaspar Núñez de Arce (1834–1903). Of the former it was said not unreasonably that his was a poetry destined for an illiterate society. Indeed the work of both poets lacks the charm of simplicity for they are frequently verbose, as with the opening of Núñez de Arce's long religious poem 'La visión de Fray Martín':

Era una noche destemplada y triste
 Del invierno aterido. Lentamente
 La nieve silenciosa, descendiendo
 Del alto cielo en abundantes copos,
 Como sudario fúnebre cubría
 La amortecida tierra. Cierzo helado
 Azotaba los árboles desnudos
 De verde pompa, pero no de escarcha.¹¹

It was an unpleasant and sad night of freezing winter. Slowly, the silent snow falling in large drops from the sky on high covered the dead earth like a funeral shroud. The icy wind whipped the trees, devoid of their green pomp but not of frost.

This is a kind of poetry-by-numbers where most concrete nouns attract a predictable adjective. It is a long way removed from the concision and understatement that, as we shall see, are hallmarks of Bécquer's poetry.

After Bécquer's early death in 1870 the finest poetry was produced outside Castile and to a considerable extent not in Spanish: by Rosalía de Castro (1837–85), writing both in her native Galician and in Castilian, and by the poet-priest Jacint Verdaguer (1845–1902) whose entire poetic production was in Catalan.