The Cambridge Introduction to
Spanish Poetry

The Cambridge Introduction to Spanish Poetry comprises an extended survey of poetry written in Spanish from the Middle Ages to the present day, including both Iberian and Latin American writing. This volume offers a non-chronological approach to the subject in order to highlight the continuity and persistence of genres and forms (epic, ballad, sonnet) and of themes and motifs (love, religious and moral poetry, satirical and pure poetry). It also supplies a thorough examination of the various interactions between author, text and reader. Containing abundant quotation, it gives a refreshing introduction to an impressive and varied body of poetry from two continents, and is an accessible and wide-ranging reference-work, designed specifically for use on undergraduate and taught graduate courses. The most comprehensive work of its kind available, it will be an invaluable resource for students and teachers alike.

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For Christine

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Preface

This is a book about poetry in Spanish, and not about the poetry of Spain. The distinction is crucial for reasons of language and geography. To speak of the poetry of Spain is to imply the presence of poems written in languages other than Spanish. Catalan poetry, particularly in the medieval and modern periods, bears favourable comparison with the major literatures of Europe, while Galician poetry, so important at a formative stage of the Iberian lyric, has also experienced a renewal, although it is not as significant a body of poetry as Catalan. As many histories of Spanish literature still consulted today were written before the death of Franco in 1975, it is opportune to point to this linguistic diversity, encouraged by the policy of regional autonomy.

There is another dimension to 'Spanishness'. As those involved in the promotion of the language as a suitable subject for the school or university curriculum never tire of observing, Spanish is a world language. In this respect it is nearer to English, the language of another early imperial power, than it is to other European languages. It is the language of the greater part of South and Central America and the Caribbean, while it is also spoken by a rapidly growing number of North Americans. The inclusion of Spanish American poetry in this volume, however, is not merely a response to a contemporary politico-linguistic reality. It is because the bonds of a common language and a partially shared literary inheritance are greater than the distinctiveness and independence that Spanish American poets sometimes claim for themselves. Indeed, in the matter of influence and innovation, the movement has by no means been one way: modern Spanish poets, no less than prose writers, have had occasion to learn from their counterparts across the Atlantic.

As this survey does not adopt a chronological approach it may be felt that it is not a history. It clearly does not follow in the long line of histories of Spanish literature that emphasize continuity and period, and that have, as a consequence, a socio-historical priority. Such an approach has both advantages and drawbacks, and I have tried to incorporate the benefits in the Introduction to my study. My emphasis, nonetheless, is upon aesthetic and ideological evolution with the result that the political and the historical are contingent rather than essential issues.

Yet my aim in adopting a synchronic method is perhaps better defined as 'differently historical' rather than purely ahistorical. Poetry involves a sense of community that is less subject to the tyranny and fashion of the present than are other literary genres; tradition in this connection is a far more dynamic concept than it is commonly taken for. In a recent review of *The New Penguin Book of English Verse*, John Carey observes how the arrangement of the poems by the date of publication rather than in poet-by-poet batches frees them from their 'authorial prisons' and thus creates 'one great metrical cataract' where one hears not so much individual voices as the voice of English poetry. Albeit with a different approach, I look to achieve a similar outcome in this study. No survey, of course, will ever equalize the resonance of these voices. Some, inevitably, stand out, such as the seventeenth-century writer Francisco de Quevedo (more a literature than a man according to Borges), and the twentieth-century Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda, who appears to have accomplished everything that one could conceivably define as poetic goals and achievements. Even these poets (to change metaphor) figure as threads in the large tapestry that tells the story of poetry in Spanish. The most valuable kind of history perhaps is one that, in the absence of all other evidence, could fulfil a pseudo-archeological function: to let later generations know what it has meant to be Spanish or Spanish American, and more specifically in the case of my own project, what use these people had for the common language, and what that use entailed in the universal medium of poetry. If I only partly or occasionally achieve such an aim, then I will feel this undertaking to have been worthwhile.

Any survey of this nature will inevitably involve matters of judgement and taste. I may be faulted on both counts, but would invoke the famous adage 'de gustibus' for the latter. As regards the former, I did not feel compelled to follow conventional practice nor engage in tokenism. Some may feel that I have adhered too closely to the canon; others, that I have not been close enough. A more or less equal division of views along these lines would be the only justification I should desire. I have neither confined myself to the major poets nor sought to promote, against the grain, those who would not have contributed somehow to the story. I did not feel under any obligation to respect the implications of a term like 'Golden Age', commonly used as a designation for Spanish literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and consequently to include minor poets from that period merely to prove its supposed richness. It seemed to me entirely appropriate to emphasize the achievements of poets like Belli and Rossetti, not merely because they were women poets – though a case could be made for positive discrimination especially when the majority of readers, and certainly of students, are female – but because they shed new light on age-old issues of gender and sexuality that have figured so largely in Spanish

poetry. I also make no apology for the predominance of twentieth-century poets. Their claim to inclusion is not on the grounds of quality; indeed to debate whether modern poetry is better or worse than medieval poetry is about as constructive as deciding if an orange is better than an apple. Nor is it because the voices of modern poets are those that we hear most clearly for being the nearest echoes and instigators of our own voices. It is because they deserve to be judged, in some cases for the first time, in the company of familiar predecessors. Finally, for voices to be heard, they need a stage or a platform. For that purpose I have been generous with quotation in accordance with Emerson's precept: 'Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it.'

The input to – as opposed to the mere writing of – a study of this nature involves a time-scale that is far longer than with more specialized books. Many of the poems considered here have lived and grown with me over many years. Moreover, one of the pleasures that I have derived from the undertaking has been to turn again to poems that I first read in school and which I have not considered seriously in the interim. The list of acknowledgements for such a project is therefore potentially endless. It should ideally contain all my students as well as my teachers, from whom I have derived, sometimes selfishly, the benefits of dialogue. I confine myself, in the interests of space, to citing, as teachers and mentors, the late Mr Georges Rochat, Professor José María Aguirre, Professor Nicholas Round and Professor Arthur Terry. I am also indebted, more specifically for this book, in a whole variety of ways to Dr Brígida Pastor and Dr Ann MacLaren of the University of Glasgow; Dr Claudio Canaparo of the University of Exeter; Dr Jordi Doce Chambrelán of the University of Oviedo; and Dr María Jesús Pando Canteli of Universidad de Deusto, San Sebastian. I am especially grateful to Dr Linda Bree of Cambridge University Press for her patience, encouragement and valuable advice. My greatest debt is to my wife Christine for her unfailing faith in this enterprise, and for helping to ensure, often in self-sacrificing ways, that this book came to be written.