

## A Dialogue With the Past: Alvaro García's *La noche junto al álbum*

The Spanish poetry of the 1980's eludes strict categorization. Some critics prefer to characterize it by the term *continuismo*, suggesting refinement of past poetic trends rather than a creative break from them (García Martín 19). *Continuismo*, however, does not adequately describe either the variety of Spanish poetry written during the decade or the nascent reaction to the neo-Baroque style of such *novísimos* as Guillermo Carnero and Luis Antonio de Villena. Indeed, Sánchez Zamareño alludes to a rehumanizing, *intimista* trend in recent poetry, based on human experience (59). One poet mentioned in this vein is Alvaro García. Born in Málaga in 1965, García established himself as a rising star by winning the 1989 Premio Hiperión for *La noche junto al álbum*.

At first glance, García's work appears to eschew the neo-Baroque imagery and cultural archeology of the *novísimos* in favor of a spare, intimate style in which "la capacidad de la sugestión se une a la gran finura en la captación de delicados matices psicológicos; lo no dicho adquiere una importancia fundamental" (García Martín 47). *La noche* juxtaposes the urban landscape to the landscape of human relationships—the photo album—to create a meditation on isolation, nostalgia, and loneliness. Yet despite its colloquial style, *La noche* reveals a complex knowledge of past poetic tradition. The image of the album signals a preoccupation with the past as a text. This study will examine how intertextual references, to urban geography and literature, enrich the postmodern dialogue that *La noche* has with the past.

Intertextuality has various definitions, ranging from Pérez Firmat's specifically literary model to Riffaterre's expanded notion of images, fragments, and sociolects that complement the textual space of the work (Riffaterre 142-3). In this way the city of Madrid, present throughout *La noche* as a constantly changing sign, functions as a type of intertext. From the topography of Madrid the poet fashions portraits of despair, transforming and deepening traditional notions of the cityscape as a focal point of human experience. "Atocha," for example, takes a well-known *madrialeño* landmark and converts it into a commentary on one's relationship with the past:

Una casa con ecos de otros huéspedes  
 que salen el domingo. En el mercado,  
 buscadores de un oro matutino  
 que madrugan pensando en dormir luego.

La ciudad está llena de fantasmas  
 como ellos y yo, la sola idea  
 de no ganar la vida y no perderla  
 o el oficio de ver cómo el día se enturbia  
 hasta que, poco a poco, se ha convertido en noche. (17)

The fellow travelers who pass through Atocha station as echos or ghosts are thus inaccessible to the poetic speaker. In this way the poem reflects the present's relationship to the past, asserting the inaccessibility of the past except as an open-ended text. This relationship is characteristic of certain types of postmodern literature (Hutcheon 146). The transitory, fleeting quality of the poem is achieved stylistically through the absence of conjugated active verbs and independent clauses. The lone independent clause, in fact, contains a stative verb: "La ciudad está llena de fantasmas." Like his fellow travelers, the speaker becomes little more than a passive observer of time's indelible, but ultimately untraceable, mark upon the past. In this

light, the last two lines—which stand out as alexandrines—point to the theme of poetry as a powerless witness to time's leaving all in darkness. The use of the present perfect, "se ha convertido," contrasts with the present, "se enturbia," to underscore both the suddenness and finality with which darkness removes the speaker's ability to witness, to write upon the past. By negating the intertext—Atocha as symbol of freedom, power, and movement, or the timeworn metaphor of life as a journey—the poet heightens the sense of despair over humankind's powerlessness to approach, let alone interpret, the past.

"Atocha" symbolizes the inexorable march of time, human isolation, and tedium, as well as humankind's failure to interact with past experience. Indeed, *La noche* presents a collage of similar poetic experiences, combining intimate personal recollections with common settings to create a contemplative atmosphere of longing and incompleteness. Moreover, the cityscape functions as an undercurrent or intertextual presence which, as a constant but ever-changing sign (Riffaterre 142-3) helps to communicate a sense of alienation in contemporary Spanish urban life. The poems, then, portray the interaction, on a textual as well as experiential level, between the city and its inhabitants.

A more sophisticated, literary use of intertext occurs in the poem "Rosa estuvo en el Sur". Here the speaker detaches himself from the scene to paint a portrait of a woman imprisoned by her past. The poem defamiliarizes the anecdote by making skillful use of personification to depersonalize the protagonist (Shklovsky 13) and vitalize the city:

En un octavo piso Rosa ensaya  
la sonata huidiza del hastío  
mientras la tarde vence el desafío  
de la urbana y monótona batalla.  
Madrid es un azul que se desmaya

sobre hileras de bruma y desvarío  
 de cláxones. Abajo pasa un río  
 de coches mientras Rosa toca y calla.  
 Rosa estuvo en el Sur y allí, rendidas  
 a las ramas del sueño, en lluvia inerte,  
 duran aún las noches fantasmales  
 que una noche escuchó la mar prendida,  
 a la puerta de un bar de mala muerte,  
 de la luz de sus manos musicales. (15)

The beginning of the poem presents a mundane anecdote. Yet even the image of Rosa rehearsing in the first quatrain is defamiliarized: by giving the musical composition such emotive force, the poem depersonalizes the protagonist. Furthermore, the indefinite "un octavo piso," as opposed to "el octavo piso," makes the scene less specific. The woman, as a result, becomes less individualized and more symbolic of a life devoured by the effects of time. As Rosa's actions diminish in importance, the surrounding environment comes to life in a battle between the din of traffic and the idleness of the afternoon. The "tarde" defeats the challenge of the urban war.

This mood continues in the second quatrain, as the tranquil and belliscose worlds mix until they are indistinguishable. The "azul" of line 5 yields to a "río de coches" in lines 7-8, while the city's identity collapses faint onto the harsh world of urban commuting. Moreover, the *esdrújula* "cláxones" interrupts the flow of the the quatrain and emphasizes the unpleasant and abrupt, yet powerful, nature of the urban world of which the woman is a prisoner. Nevertheless, the protagonist reasserts her physical presence in line 8 through her practicing. This playing, however, blends with the outer world and becomes subordinate to her inner silence. Vitality and action thus lead to passivity and reflection.

What challenges the reader is the variety of poetic devices used—

especially the personification of the cityscape and resultant depersonalization of Rosa—to convey this sense of weariness. The defamiliarization, making the familiar appear strange, stylizes the anecdote and draws the reader away from the deceptively colloquial toward a more profound reading. Equally as essential to developing the text's potential, as well as its dialogue with the past, are the intertexts from other Spanish poetic traditions.

If Alvaro García's work typifies a trend toward *intimismo*, to faith in the poetic word to communicate vital personal experience, then *modernismo* would seem to exert a positive influence. The *modernista* movement used language to create new worlds and convey subtle ranges of emotion through symbol. In line 2 of "Rosa estuvo en el Sur" the intertext is Valle-Inclán's *Sonata de estío*, the second novelette in a series that traces the life and adventures of the decadent hero, the Marqués de Bradomín. While each *sonata* is distinct, all share *modernista* trademarks: archaisms, alliteration, contrast of light and darkness, an aristocratic atmosphere, a self-conscious dependence on cultural "props," and, above all, a textual world in which esthetic values predominate (Smith 109). The sonata's presence as an intertextual fragment in García's poem is noteworthy, for the sonata represents a highly stylized, artistic interpretation of a decadent environment that was turn-of-the-century Spain, especially emphasizing Spain's decline from a glorious past. This stylization is corroborated by García's own stylization of the mechanized, oppressive world of the city. Moreover, the protagonist's attempt to recapture the "sonata huidiza del hastío" reflects the poet's fleeting attempt to recover *modernismo's* poetic and artistic landscape in a postmodern era. In this way García's postmodern parody has written over the *modernista* text but failed to erase it. Hutcheon comments on postmodernism's peculiarly ironic relationship with the past by stating that "irony does indeed mark [postmodernism's] difference from the past, but the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm—textually and

hermeneutically—the connection with the past” (125).

The first eight lines have uncovered several enigmas for the reader. First, the protagonist, rather than being central to the anecdote, is subsumed by the sensorial characterization of the cityscape. The reader is thus left with several possible interpretations of the defamiliarized everyday scene: social commentary, personal memory, reworking of *modernista* themes. Moreover, the structure of the two quatrains—couching symbolism in colloquial language, prolonging the scene through the *esdrújula*, personifying the environment—highlights tensions within the text which culminate in the intertext with the *Sonata de estío*.

In the final six lines the cause of the woman's *hastío* is suggested to be her failure to free herself from her past. Again, the protagonist becomes passive as the music dominates her mind. The personification forces the reader to think of the music in a new light, as a metaphor for meaning, beauty, and mystery. It is the music, not the protagonist, that has life in the poem. Thematically, then, the sonnet appears to resolve its tensions by completing its portrait of a woman living in the shadow of her memory.

Intertextuality helps to open up “Rosa estuvo en el Sur” still further. Where the first part of the poem reveals a postmodern parody of a work by Valle-Inclán, the second part recalls, implicitly at least, García Lorca's *Poema del cante jondo*. Such Lorquian poems as “Malagueña” and “Las seis cuerdas” develop themes of music, death, and violence in the seedy taverns of the South. García's and Lorca's texts would seem to be related on what Pérez Firmat has called a “semantic” level (4); that is, the imagery of García's poem, without borrowing exact passages, has similar semantic value to Lorca's works. The reader of “Rosa estuvo en el Sur” cannot help but engage Lorca's *Cante jondo*. More important, the relationship poses new questions about the wider vision the poem seeks to convey. If, on the one hand, the text resolves its anecdotal tensions and leaves us with a more or less complete

picture of a protagonist living in her past, the intertexts, on the other hand, open the poem to other interpretations.

Lorca's "Malagueña," as noted by Debicki (227), creates a stylized, artistic reality that supersedes the anecdote, with the result that the stylization becomes the major artistic force of the poem. While "la muerte" is a metaphor for the *flamenco* whose sounds enter and exit the tavern, the artistic reality being created suppresses the anecdote. García's text, without reconstructing Lorca's, nevertheless alludes to its *ambiente* and thus sustains an intertextual dialogue with it. In Riffaterre's words, the poem's imagery "activates" the intertext (144). What the two intertexts share is the primacy of art over life. Furthermore, Lorca's intertext opens up García's poem beyond the scene of Rosa's *hastío* to wider concerns about the aims of poetry, specifically the relationship of contemporary Spanish poetry to its past. Each level of the poem, then, is seen as an attempt to establish a dialogue with a past, human or literary.

"Rosa estuvo en el Sur" is a complex poem. Its rhetorical devices force the reader to look at a familiar setting in a new light, where lifeless beings—as in "Atocha"—inhabit vital, albeit harsh and unforgiving, cityscapes. Also, the poem establishes a dialogue, through intertexts, with prior poetic traditions and links the artistic past with a personal history to pose new questions regarding the meaning of past, both as anecdote and as text. Text and reader engage in a constant effort to approach, interpret, and rework these themes.

Other poems of *La noche junto al álbum* use different artistic media to express this inability to come to terms with the past. "Oleo al antepasado joven," for example, looks at a portrait of a relative:

La rutina de estar junto al paisaje  
 con miedo a lo que queda. Aún medita  
 si habrá alguien esperándole o si nunca

tendrá fin esa edad de pensar solo.

Algunas veces dice débilmente  
la canción que hace preso al pasajero  
de un tiempo detenido. (14)

The speaker, like the portrait, straddles past, present, and future; this convergence epitomizes one's inability to control one's life, to relate to it except as to multifaceted text. As a result, the speaker compares the poetic subject to a passenger held "prisoner" by scheduling delays. By thus relating the portrait to urban life, the poem recalls "Atocha" and "Rosa estuvo en el Sur." All three texts speak to the isolation of the human condition.

Perhaps the multiplicity of perspectives on time and space is the major achievement of *La noche junto al álbum*. Alvaro García writes poems that, while appearing to be static, contemplative musings, actually inquire into the relationship among the many movements of life, the shape of one's environment, and the influence of literary tradition. In "Atocha" the inaccessibility of the past is personified by the depersonalized, phantasmagoric image of the commuter, who has left no definitive mark on his world for the speaker to comprehend or follow. The skillful use of the Atocha station as an intertext, a system of signs (Riffaterre 159), contributes to the effect of observing movement without being able to recapture the past through memory. In a more self-consciously literary vein, "Rosa estuvo en el Sur" activates two literary intertexts—one *modernista* (Valle-Inclán's sonatas) and one from the Generation of 1927 (García Lorca's *Poema del cante jondo*)—to evoke the poem's attitude toward its textual past at the same time that it reveals the power that personal past exercises over the life of the protagonist. While the poem parodies the *sonatas*, it does not destroy the legacy of *modernismo*; rather, as all postmodern parody, it both "enshrines" the past

and "questions" it (Hutcheon 126). García's text, then, does not negate its intertexts, but transforms them while retaining their goal of the primacy of art.

As Summerhill has noted, it is perhaps premature to judge the literary merit of the poets who have begun their careers during the 1980's. He also cautions against relegating the *novísimos*—Carnero, Villena, and others—to history. Indeed, Spanish poetry may be between periods, where eclecticism predominates (112). If anything, *La noche junto al álbum* shows a poet who has thoughtfully considered his place in Spanish poetry without being overly indulgent or self-conscious. A study of representative poems, and the ways they use intertexts, illuminates the process by which Alvaro García carves an individual niche by forging a dialogue with past traditions and portraying humankind's present condition in a complex and novel way.

Alan S. Bruflat  
Wayne State College

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