

A psycholinguistic approach to poets, poetry and time: Immortal Nature's children

Autor: Torres Revert, José Luis (Licenciado en Filosofía y Letras. Especialidad Filología Inglesa).

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Abstract

The relations between the poet and poetry, poetry and time, have been sometimes expressed in terms of maternity and immortality respectively. These conventions are found not only from a critic or theoretical point of view, but in the poem itself. There are poems that refer to one, two or the three elements, but what they have in common is a more or less explicit reference or reflexion about the creative act. Literature is among other things, a group of conventions assumed in reading. That narrative pact between the writer and the reader is more characteristic and necessary in poetry.

Keywords: poetry, psycholinguistics, authorship, literary criticism

Título: Un acercamiento psicolingüístico a los poetas, la poesía y el tiempo: hijos inmortales de la naturaleza.

Resumen

Las relaciones entre poeta y poesía, poesía y tiempo, se han expresado a veces en términos de maternidad e inmortalidad respectivamente. Estas convenciones se encuentran no sólo desde un punto de vista crítico o teórico, sino en el mismo poema. Hay poesías que mencionan a uno, dos o los tres elementos, pero lo que tienen en común es una referencia más o menos explícita al acto creativo. La literatura es entre otras cosas, un grupo de convenciones que se asumen en la lectura. Ese pacto narrativo entre el escritor y el lector es más característica y necesaria en la poesía.

Palabras clave: poesía, psicolingüística, autoría, crítica literaria.

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*"But were some child of yours alive that time,
You should live twice: in it and in my rhyme."
(Shakespeare couplet from Sonnet XVII)*

The relations between the poet and Poetry, poetry and time, have been sometimes expressed in terms of maternity and immortality respectively. These conventions are found not only from a critic or theoretical point of view, but in the poem itself. There are poems that refer to one, two or the three elements, but what they have in common is a more or less explicit reference or reflexion about the creative act.

Literature is among other things, a group of conventions that are assumed in reading. That narrative pact between the writer and the reader, in fact the text and the reader, is more characteristic and necessary in poetry. In other words, the temporal—realistic view in the approach to the text, must be modified; the complete alienation is required by definition and nature of poetry.

This idea is present in a critic perspective when it is said for instance that "Poetry generates the abolition of temporal outlines, of lineality and multiplies and increases, by means of metaphors and thematic isolation, the contexts." (Pozuelo, 1988). On the other side, the same idea is included in some poems, where poetry is contemplated from poetry, the poetic function of language has become what could be called "metapoetic".

The consciousness of the intrinsic qualities of poetry and how reality and creation are related, is shown in poems in different ways: through the relationship between the creator and the creation -taking into account the way is made, the creature-, secondly by dealing with time and its effect on poetry, and last by using conventional or non-conventional statements about poetry as theme, where the "metapoetic" sense is easier to note.

The first conscious method is born at the moment the relationship between the author and the text (not necessarily written) cannot be broken or denied. The concept of copyright is a relatively modern concept and nowadays is considered by laws in most of countries¹⁵⁸.

The authorship of the creation in the text is usually personified by a poetic “I-voice” (played with any personal pronoun) or represented by entities such as muses and other non-real speakers).

Since Plato, the link between the creator and creation has been reflected through metaphors: the poet as mediator of gods and “ars” or the image of “nature’s child” in Sidney’s words (“Invention, Nature’s child, fled stepdame Study’s blows”), where that link would be a sort of umbilical cord. Because there is also maternity in the poet, physical and spiritual, poetic engendering is also a kind of giving birth, and giving birth is to create from the intimate plenitude.

The vision of the creative process can be observed in “The Author to Her Book” by Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) and in a sonnet by Félix Lope de Vega (1562-1635).

The Author to Her Book

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad, exposed to public view,
Made thee in rags, halting to th’ press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
The visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could.
I washed thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet,
Yet still thou run’st more hobbling than is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save homespun cloth i’ th’ house I find.
In this array ‘mongst vulgars may’st thou roam.
In critic’s hands beware thou dost not come,
And take thy way where yet thou art not known;
If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none;
And for thy mother, she alas is poor,
Which caused her thus to send thee out of door.

Sonnet 33

Versos de amor, conceptos esparcidos,
engendrados del alma en mis cuidados,
partos de mis sentidos abrasados,
con más dolor que libertad nacidos;
expósitos al mundo, en que perdidos,
tan rotos anduvistes y trocados,
que sólo donde fuistes engendrados

¹⁵⁸ “La propiedad intelectual de una obra literaria, artística o científica, corresponde a su autor por el sólo hecho de su creación” (Law 22/1987 of Intellectual Property of 11th November)

fuérades por la sangre conocidos;
 pues que le hurtáis el laberinto a Creta,
 a Dédalo los altos pensamientos,
 la furia al mar, las llamas al abismo,
 si aquel áspid hermoso nos aceta,
 dejad la tierra, entretened los vientos,
 descansaréis en vuestro centro mismo.

In the first, the feminine condition of the author favours and intensifies the effect of the metaphor of motherhood, which is present in the whole poem: offspring, birth, mother, Father and Mother (lines 1, 2, 8, 22 and 23) constitute the semantic field; also explored in Lope's one: engendrados, cuidados, partos, nacidos, expeisitos and sangre. Bradstreet's poem deals with the feelings and attitudes of a real mother. She goes from a tone of rejection as it were a non-desired child: "ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain" (line 1) to to shame: "at thy return my blushing was not small" (line 7) but filtered by humour when she evokes tasks such as washing and dressing (lines 13 to 18) which would have the aim of obtain indulgence (as it is usually given to childish actions) on the part of the "public view", public that she is at the same time disdaining: "among vulgars may'st thou roam" (line 19). The same public Lope called dumb and infamous ("vulgo necio e infame").

The image of a protectionist mother: "I cast thee by as one unfit for light"(line 9) refers to a lack of confidence in her creation. The comment "Thy visage was so irksome in my sight" (line 10) together with that creative insecurity, shyness or fear, expresses the constant search of the artist for perfection (errors correction and rewriting by "washing" and "dressing"), and some psychological aspects associated to it, such as perfectionism and neurotic behaviour, besides the emotional variability of the most of the artists. Moreover, even the concept of the creative experience as an individual act –not with egocentric features here– is mentioned: "If for thy Father asked, say thou had'st none"(line 22).

The valoration of the "children" and their state and aspect is different in the two poems. In the American, the child is full of "defects" and protected and in the Spanish, though the children have been "perdidos", "rotos" and "trocados"¹⁵⁹?; they are magnified and praised. The difference would be lesser if the reader thought of a sub-tone of false modesty in the first.

In this one, it also can be pointed out a paradoxical circumstance that only in a fictional world could take place; the author addresses to her book like a child, but she does not use a mother-ease speaking, but a complicated language which in fact is poetry and at the same time, the child himself. Two examples of ambivalent addressing where that duality can be noted are "rambling"(line 8) and "feet"(line 15). The first stands for "wandering"(applied to the child) and "labyrinthian" (applied to the poem); the labyrinth is a symbol of confusion and disorientation, and this image also appears in tope: "le hurtais el laberinto a Creta" (line 9). The second stands for "plural of foot"(obviously applied to the child) and for regular poetic meter.

Those children are considered immortal in some poems, but what is really suggested is the way poetry lives in time, that is, eternally.

The boast of immortality for one's verses was a Renaissance convention and goes back to the classics. It implies not egotism, but a faith in the permanence of poetry.

Among the samples, three sonnets of different ages give three examples of the topic: "My verse your vertues shall rare eternize"(Spenser), "Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade/When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:/So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see/So long lives this, and this gives life to thes."(Shakespeare) and "On a Poet's lips I slept/(...)/Nurslings of Inmortality!" (Shelley).

That belief is not restricted to the artist and his fictions. It has been considered since Aristotle to the modern literary critic, and among the theories dealing with that aspect of the Poetic function, it is found the apocalyptic one.

In that approach to the text, it is expounded that one of the meanings of the adjective apocalyptic, refers to an ideal relationship between the reader and the text through abstraction and imagination, where the mechanist and chronological passing of time and its effects is broken, changed or idealized. This conception sees the future (consequence

¹⁵⁹ It refers to the great oral and written spreading of Lope's love poems, romances above all.

of historical events in the present) full of positive energy, and life, by means of the creative experience and its paradigms as link between historic reality and the reality that is abstracted in that moment by the reader.

The logical development of every process or action leads to a consequence or end that would be the physical and/or spiritual death of something. The poetic ideal vision changes it into eternity and immortality and that change to an ideal non-temporal perspective of the world, as necessary requirement in reading, is always implicit and sometimes explicit by taking the social convention of death as topic and breaking or questioning its real or irreal conventional implications (absence of activity, sorrow, fear.../after- life, heaven, paradise..

That explicit reference taking death as an image to relate poetry to time can be seen from two different points of view in two poems by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886): "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I heard a Fly buzz".

Because I could not stop for Death

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – ‘tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –

I heard a Fly buzz

I heard a Fly buzz - when I died -
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air -
Between the Heaves of Storm -

The Eyes around - had wrung them dry -
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset - when the King
Be witnessed - in the Room -

I willed my Keepsakes - Signed away
 What portion of me be
 Assignable - and then it was
 There interposed a Fly -

With Blue - uncertain - stumbling Buzz -
 Between the light - and me -
 And then the Windows failed - and then
 I could not see to see -

The first presents death as revelation, salvation and eternal plenitude in a quiet, conscious and intimate tone full of positive images: "labor and leisure"(line 7) and exponents of life; "Civility"(line 8) as good quality, positive; "School"(line 9) as community, full of life, hope, future, children; "Children" (line 9) as life, future; "Recess"(line 10) as rest, peace, liberation, plenitude; "Ring" (line 10) as affection, symbol of perfection and "Gazing Grain" (line 11) as food, Nature, bucolic features, all in contrast to the second poem where death is seen with ironic attitude (note the typical background of irony: mechanic, cold, inhospitable -the real opposed to the ideal-) and where any dramatism or solemnity is denied by the physical presence of a fly that interposes "between the light"(conventional metaphor of eternity) and her (line 14).

Three topics related to death are filtered by irony following the cause-effect logic: death - sorrow/confusion - revelation/change. Those topics are:

First: The "Stillness" (lines 2-3). It is physical (represented by the "Room") and spiritual ("Air" as ethereal element and symbol) which means that there is not any, supernatural phenomenon, in contrast with the "Reaves of Storm" (line 4) as a natural one. The ironic tone is strengthened by the effect of taking as the second element of the comparison, the non-physical one and not the "Room" as real referent ("The Stillness in the Room/Was like the Stillness in the Air").

Second: Reactions related to that moment such as weeping and confusion are noted but by their absence: "The Eyes around-had wrung them dry-/And Breaths were gathering firm" (lines 5-6).

Third: The revelation, epifany light, trip or change as something expected and even the silence is denied by the fly (lines 12-16).

In the first poem, death is referred as a kind and sensitive entity ("kind" and "with no haste") and it is part of the subject and object of the enunciation- ("Ourselves"/"We") while in the second, the same situation -but not the speaker's view- is only expressed at the beginning of the poem in an intransitive verbal form. This different speakers' view is also found in the tone by a sense of eternity, peace, joy and plenitude in the first, and a sense of enlightenment, dissatisfaction and bitterness (intensified by irony) in the second.

In narrative terms, the first shows a change in the verbal tenses from past to present in the last stanza where the actual "eternal" state is valorated from that poetic present, while in the second there is not any change, there is a before without an after, and if there is any, it is the sound of a fly in the darkness...

Finally, the animal images and their "scenic" function are also quite different. Animals have been always related to death by cultures and religions. From the idea of "animal spirits" imagined by Descartes to explain- the relation between soul and body —where those animal spirits would be the lightest part of the blood- to the different reincarnations in animals and their meanings. "Horses" and "Fly" are the animal images found in these poems. The first is positive (strong, useful, solemn, distinguished looking, legendary -remember some famous names of heroes'horses- and even the horse in Greek mythology as Pegasus -the winged horse- is symbol of poetic inspiration) and the second is negative (repulsive, annoying, nasty, associated to excrements and decomposition).

In both poems, the poetic time conventions are required at the moment the speaker - instinctively identified with the real-life author- is "dead" and only from a fictional paradigm could narrate something. This situation makes the poem "immortal" because it is not subject to the time of reading, in fact to the temporal laws.

The fact that poems referred to poetic conventions as the last by saying for example "I poem should be motionless in time/ As the moon climbs" (from "Ars Poetica") constitutes what could be called a "metapoetic" feature.

This kind of features is found in the following poems:

- "The motive for metaphor" by Wallace Stevens
- "The Idea of Order at Key West" by Wallace Stevens
- "Ars poetica" by Archibald MacLeish
- "Poetry" by Marianne Moore
- "The dish of fruit" by William Carlos Williams

The title of the poem shows from the first moment the subject to deal with in three of them ("The motive of metaphor", "Ars poetica" and "Poetry").

In "The motive for metaphor" the imagination is described as creative power based on reality, where the motive for a metaphor is found but not constitutes itself a metaphor, it needs a poetic context of dream, fantasy and irreality, ("Where you yourself were never quite yourself and did not want nor have to be"-lines 11-12- and where "exhilaration of changes"-line 13- are desired. The poem is full of more or less conventional poetic images that have to do with nature: trees, wind, leRvem, sky,, clouds, bird and moon. The two seasons mentioned -autumn and spring- would be the most suitable to enter in that fictitious world by means of poetry, which is formed by metaphors, because the first brings to mind feelings of loneliness and solitude, and the second, sense of happiness and plenitude, both states favour expression.

The same idea about the way human imagination- deals with perceptions from "Nature" in an aesthetic context (poetry) is explored in "The Idea of Order at Key West".

In "Ars poetica", it could be thought of pretentiousness but it is an evocation of classic treatises, from the title to the way of exposition: short statements, sententiousness and comparisons with the particle "as" and not "like" (linguistically , it is not "similar" but "equal to").

Natural images are also found here: fruit, stone, moss, bird moon, trees, winter leaves, grasses and sea.

As in "The motive for metaphor", two opposed emotional states are mentioned: "For all the history of grief" (line 19) and "For love" (line 20) love can exist in autumn and sorrow in spring or any other season but it would not be conventional.

The different statements could seem paradoxical in two aspects: the text is supposed to be in the way it describes a poem must be from a full knowledge of facts, but it is not "mute", "dumb", "silent" and "wordless"; and the last lines say that "A poem should not mean/ Out be" but words are necessary as instruments to mean. The message is that a poem must mean with images, suggested from words and being part of a timeless new reality.

On the other side, "Poetry" deals not paradoxically but ironically with the poetic function and the function of poetry,. The first is noted from the "high-sounding interpretation" (line 7), "unintelligible" (line 8) and the discrimination between "business documents and school-books" (lines 17-18). The second is based on the utility of poetry, idea that is argued and deduced from the first line, where by means of rethoric methods, the speaker calls the attention of the reader and looks for his complicity (the initial tone given by "fiddle" and "perfect contempt" is unexpected in a poem supposed to deal with poetry).

The poem concludes with the idea of poetry as link between the raw material (nature/reality) and the "genuine" (important because of its usefulness, quality that cannot be valorated as such without understanding it).

That irony is also present in "The dish of fruit" where the question becomes illogical after explaining the process of constructing a metaphor and how the mental evocation from it works in a poem.

A mental evocation produced by a metaphor like the last and that is supposed on the part of the reader, is only one of the aspects related to reading that is considered as a convention in the paradigm of poetry.

As any convention or assumed belief that takes place in the imagination by means of abstraction, it is not an easy task to explain from the rational "conventional" method of an essay, the relations between author and text such as where or whether biographic aspects are needed for the comprehension and apprehension of the world represented, or where the poetic voices have meaningful autonomy respecting the real-life speaker, and how poetic verbal tenses are not subject to the unchangeable chronological passing of time.

All these and other semantic-stylistic facts constitute what is called poetry. This literary genre involves many instincts and feelings on the part of the reader, what scientifically, makes it more difficult to study and deal with. It is a representation system of reality based on conventions that as other non-poetic conventions, have had a maturation process and that are required to enjoy it as art because as Moore's poem says, "we do not admire what we cannot understand".

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