

Intertextuality and Subversion:
Poems by Ana Rossetti and Amparo Amorós

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For Helena Percas Ponseti

The ways in which literary texts communicate by positioning themselves in relation to prior texts have of course fascinated critics for centuries—perhaps because of our awareness, in spite of many doctrines to the contrary over time, that no text stands alone, that the experience we derive from it occurs in a larger context of some sort. *How* texts are examined in relation to others probably says as much about the perspective of the critic as about anything else: late nineteenth-century influence studies, which sought to discover specific, objective details and ideas that authors took from their predecessors, help define the idea-centered, positivistic vision of the period. Meanwhile detailed New Critical analyses of paradoxical transformations of old themes in poetry make clear the underlying premise of that critical tradition, according to which a work embodies and makes permanent complex layers of meaning.

Our studies of intertextualities will likewise (and inevitably) say as much about our interests and perspectives as about the works we study. The awareness that the meanings of any text may not be unchanging, and that they depend upon the circumstances of its sender and its receiver (and upon the evolution of language), for example, has led recent critics to explore a much wider range of intertextualities: correspondences between literary and colloquial texts, between verbal and visual ones, between textual and social codes. Having learned from post-structuralist criticism the limitations of literary language, its susceptibility to being undermined, we can also be much more aware of ways in which a process of undermining can produce new experiences.¹

That awareness has influenced not only the criticism of Spanish poetry, but also the poetry written in Spain during the last decade or so. Poets, aware of the malleability of literary language, have created new visions by inverting (and subverting) prior literary schemes. Some of this, of course, had been occurring for centuries: we can find works by Quevedo, Lope, Alberti, or Salinas that transform prior texts. But the procedure becomes much more common in the 1970s and 1980s, and involves many more kinds of transformations and inversions. It is used by poets young and old, and involves the undoing of both learned and popular prior texts. Guillermo Carnero, Pere Gimferrer, and other so-

called "novísimos" consciously derived their effects from literary allusions; Angel González and Gloria Fuertes produced intense shock by manipulating popular songs and everyday expressions and clichés. One can conclude that writers, as well as critics, are operating from an increased consciousness of the malleability and instability of language in general and of poetic expression in particular. This consciousness could also be connected to a reaction—a revolution, if you wish—against the univalence and the focus on direct message and meaning that underlay previous decades of Spanish life and writing, and can be exemplified both in the texts of the Franco régime and in the social poetry that opposed it. Intertextual play and subversion in poetry can be linked, to some degree, to the irreverence and search for change and contemporaneity that are so apparent in the Madrid of the "movida" and of what has been called the postmodern cultural milieu (see Barella, 7-15).

It is not accidental, I think, that intertextual inversions and subversions are most apparent in works written by women poets. A considerable number of women poets, first of all, gain prominence in the late 1970s and the 1980s. With few exceptions, they were born in the 1950s, and form part of the first generation that reached adulthood as Spain started undergoing very rapid social change and as new patterns of life developed while traditional ones (and traditional attitudes) still existed around them. Many of them gained critical recognition because of their status as new women poets, while simultaneously suffering snide critiques.² They were put in the position of having to find new places for themselves as individuals and as poets, and of situating their work somewhere within what had been a predominantly male canon. Intertextuality offered them, as we shall see, some very valuable ways of so doing. And an examination of its use will help us, in turn, understand some new ways in which they engender and convey experience through their texts—ways that differ significantly from those we find in the typical writings of the prior poets of modernity in Spain.

In cases such as the ones I will be examining, intertextuality is used to call into question canonical conventions or ways of reading, often (but not exclusively) those of a text that assumed a male perspective. I have selected poems by two very different poets—one of whom (Ana Rossetti) flaunts her contemporary and irreverent vision, while the other (Amparo Amorós) adopts a consciously learned and academic stance. Yet, in these texts, they both achieve similar effects, using intertextual play to shock the reader into new perspectives on the conventions underlying literary traditions, and new attitudes with respect to literary and vital topics.

I will begin with Rossetti, if only because the procedure she uses is so dramatic. In her very first book of poetry, *Los devaneos de Erato* ('The Madness of Eratus' 1980), Rossetti shocked some readers with sexually explicit language and situations. What some failed to notice, however, is that such language was not used gratuitously, but rather served to give new perspectives on mythical figures, traditional themes, old topics. These poems ultimately had the effect of redefining myths and conventions.

This is even clearer in the poem I have selected for analysis, "Chico Wrangler" 'Wrangler Boy,' first published in Ramón Buenaventura's anthology *Las diosas blancas* ('White Goddesses,' 1985), and then included in Rossetti's *Indicios vehementes* ('Vehement Indices' *Poesía 1979-1984*):³

Dulce corazón mío de súbito asaltado.
 Todo por adorar más de lo permisible.
 Todo porque un cigarro se asienta en una boca
 y en sus jogosas sedas se humedece.
 Porque una camiseta incitante señala,
 de su pecho, el escudo durísimo,
 y un vigoroso brazo de la mínima manga sobresale.
 Todo porque unas piernas, unas perfectas piernas,
 dentro del más ceñido pantalón, frente a mí se separan.
 Se separan.

(Rossetti 99)

Sweet heart of mine, suddenly assaulted.
 And all because I adored more than is permitted.
 All because a cigarette sits in a mouth
 and moistens gradually in its silkiness.
 Because a provoking undershirt marks,
 The very sharp shield of his chest,
 and a strong arm from the slight sleeve protrudes.
 All because a pair of legs, of perfect legs
 inside the tightest pants, spread out before me.
 They spread before me.⁴

The first line could well have appeared in a cliché sentimental poem, and may even recall for us "traditional" love poetry, or perhaps the stereotype of the poem we might expect a cliché "poetisa" to have produced. In the light of this expectation, the second line could be read

as referring to some traditional feminine modesty (though it makes us wonder).

The rest of the poem then totally undoes any such reading and perspective. By the third line it becomes obvious that the text's speaker lusts, in rather primitive fashion, after a stereotypical male body. The description alludes to the figure in a specific Wrangler jeans advertisement and reflects all its details (including the cigarette). Yet the details are so presented that they highlight the speaker's mood: the cigarette at least suggests a symbolic, erotic/phallic reading, and the rhythm of the last lines makes the primitive desire apparent in them all the more obvious. But what is the final effect of this?

Any male reader who might be shocked enough to want to dismiss this text as bad poetry will first have to consider how it relates to prior poetic conventions. Is the stance taken by this female speaker significantly different from that adopted by the male speakers of "carpe diem" poems by Góngora or Quevedo, of Lorca's "Romance de la casada infiel" ('Ballad of the Unfaithful Wife'), of poems by Neruda and Paz that describe women's sexual allure? Rossetti has taken an old poetic convention, in which the male speaker wishes to possess a female, inverted the roles of the sexes, and as a result subverted a tradition. Once we see this, we notice other ways in which the poem undermines traditions. The male figure described is the subject of a specific, modern jeans advertisement, not an idealized shepherd; the speaker, likewise, is blatantly down-to-earth. These subversions make us realize, through parallelism, how traditional poems that made woman into sexual object implied a perspective as egotistic and exploitative as the one presented here in reverse.

Taking into account the poem's readers, we will see that it functions very differently from the static work traditional critics envisioned. Were we to treat it as a static, objective work, we would say that it describes a woman's lustful look at a jeans advertisement. But the poem's "meaning" and "effect" go well beyond that. They emerge from the reader's surprised reaction to the statement and perspective of the text's speaker. They will vary from reader to reader and be affected by individual literary and social conventions and expectations. We can envision the shocked response of a traditional Spanish male; the amused, maybe even smug smile of the feminist woman; the curiosity of the professional critic. (We might say that the implied author, conscious of her literary game, stands back, refrains from commentary, and addresses us only through her blatantly un-self-conscious speaker, giving us the opportunity of reacting in one of several ways possible, and hence collaborating creatively with her text). Intertextuality has served to

create what is on the one hand a very specific, determined perspective, but on the other a very open and indeterminate text, whose meanings will depend on its interaction with the reader. (This in turn suggests that the very use of certain kinds of intertextuality is a means of stretching the limits of the text: by making us read one given text against the background of others, it also makes us read it against the texts we bring to bear from within us.)

Similar readings can be offered of other poems by Rossetti: "Calvin Kein, underdrawers" (Buenaventura 68) again uses an advertisement, this time for underwear, to shock the reader with the speaker's perspective; in "Un señor casi amante de mi marido. . ." 'A Gentleman, Almost Lover of my Husband' (Rossetti 28), the traditional theme of aging acquires a new dimension through the surprising context. On the other hand, Rossetti's poetry also fits within major Spanish lyric traditions: it is founded on an underlying consciousness of human temporality (and a sense of language as battling against it); it uses language artfully, often making very skillful use of rhythms and forms used in seventeenth century Spanish verse, and combining modern settings with mythological allusions. The result is a very singular and significant work.

Amparo Amorós, a perceptive critic as well as a conscious artist, has identified her work with the goal of expressing a "pensamiento poético" 'poetic thought,' a coherent vision of reality embodied in a truly creative language (building on the ideas of María Zambrano and José Angel Valente). In her first book, *Ludia* (1983), she explored with depth and subtlety the relationships of life and art, the way in which the latter gives meaning to the former; in *La honda travesía del águila* ('The Deep Travels of the Eagle' 1986), this same subject was presented against the backdrop of love (earth-bound as well as mystical), and of prior poetic traditions (San Juan, Jorge Guillén). In these books and in the more recent *Arboles en la música* ('Trees in Music'), intertextual echoes contributed to a serious exploration of art's role in highlighting life's values.

In 1988, Amorós surprised her readers by publishing *Quevediana*, a series of thirty satirical sonnets echoing those of the Baroque poet Francisco de Quevedo, but written in contemporary language and focused on contemporary Spanish types and scenes: an advice columnist writing to a husband-seeker, a masochist boyfriend, a literary café gathering, an arrogant critic, a watcher of soap operas. The poet's prologue notes that these poems were written in reaction to a disturbing environment. In my mind, they overcome the limitations of that pedestrian environment by satirically highlighting its pettiness and its flaws. Intertexts, as in the case of Rossetti, are used to get the reader into the process.

This is apparent in "Soneto burlesco a un Apolo para necias acaloradas" 'Burlesque Sonnet to an Apollo, for Passionate Dumb Girls':

Erase un hombre a un pito atornillado,
 érase un mascarón superlativo,
 érase el propio Falo redivivo
 érase un torreón desenvainado,
 érase un priapsismo tan osado
 que perdiera de vista hasta el ombligo,
 un ciprés-surtidor intempestivo,
 espolón pertinaz siempre engallado.
 No le pidáis ingenio ni prudencia
 porque exigirle fuera desvarío
 a un Tarzán bien dotado, inteligencia,
 o a un King-Kong miramientos y albedrío
 que para consolar una impaciencia
 hasta un orangután cubre el avío.
 (27)

There was a man screwed on to a " . . ."
 It was a superlative masked figure.
 it was the very Phallus, alive,
 it was a large unsheathed tower,
 it was such a daring erection
 that it would even lose sight of the belly,
 a cypress-fountain so ill-timed,
 a pertinacious prow, always upright.
 Do not ask it for ingenuity or prudence,
 because it would be madness to demand
 intelligence from a well-endowed Tarzan,
 or sensitivity and will from a King Kong;
 since even an orangutan meets the need
 of fulfilling an impatient desire.

Two intertexts are in fact invoked: Quevedo's sonnet "Erase un hombre a una nariz pegado" ('There Was a Man Glued to a Nose'), whose structure and pattern of parallel metaphors is followed closely, and the common modern reading of that poem as having sexual implications. That reading is extended in the most literal and graphic fashion, leading to what on one level might constitute a parody of crude fantasies. Intertext, language and imagery are used to great effect. Quevedo's

image “érase un hombre a una nariz pegado” is duplicated in the way in which the part of the body is larger than the whole, and is artificially attached. But changing “pegado” to “atornillado” intensifies the dehumanizing mechanistic perspective even more, and also brings in levels of word play.

By aiming the sonnet at “necias acaloradas,” the implied author, on one level, exaggerates and hence parodies a female sexual desire that would result in such crudity that “hasta un orangután cubre el avío.” More importantly, however, by exaggerating a whole tradition of sexually allusive poetry (and of sexual readings of poetry), as well as the *topos* of male sexual prowess, it mocks and trivializes them and any literary world in which they might be found: the Baroque one in which Quevedo lived and wrote sexist texts, the modern one in which male and female poets, straight and gay, do likewise. In this sense the poem, and the book from which it comes, indeed overcome the irritating limitations of a modern environment by parodying it into absurdity. I can see Amorós completing this text, chuckling, and happily going back to the beautiful poems of *Arboles en la música*.

“Erase un hombre . . .,” like ‘Chico Wrangler,’ can elicit several readings. It may make us react against female sexually-allusive poetry; it may also make us critique the tradition of sexually allusive (maybe smug) male texts. More generally, it communicates the absurdity of a whole modern environment of explicit behavior and writing.

These two texts, by two important and innovative poets, gain their effects by undermining prior conventions, attitudes, and stereotypes. As they do so, they function in a fashion different from typical works of art of modernity: rather than attempting to embody one set of meanings, they set off within their readers various levels of resonance, inviting us to extend, modify, and continue their critical commentary on society, on men and women, on poetic conventions and traditions. They stand as excellent examples of several characteristics of what I see as postmodern Spanish poetry of the last decade: more complex and creative ways of using intertexts, a subversion of traditional social and sexual patterns, a change in the way in which a text functions for its reader.

Notes

1. A lucid general overview of contemporary perspectives on intertextuality is offered in Jonathan Culler’s *The Pursuit of Signs*, 37-39 and 100-108. Gustavo Pérez Firmat has suggested that the interplay between the new text and its

intertexts produces, in the reader, a new, different work: this seems very applicable to the poems I study here.

2. This is best exemplified in the anthology of womens' poetry titled *Las diosas blancas* ('White Goddess'), whose editor Ramón Buenaventura, on the one hand praised and promoted the poetry, and on the other filled his introductions with paternalistic, condescending, and at times sexist comments. In their interviews with Sharon Keefe Ugalde in *Conversaciones y poemas* (*Conversations and Poems*), several women poets take ambiguous attitudes to being read primarily as women and reject being classified as feminists.

3. In an interview that precedes *Indicios vehementes*, Rossetti notes that, while she prefers to "seduce" the public rather than to bother it, she was pleased that her erotic poems provoked strong reactions, since this indicated that she had achieved her goal (14).

4. The translation is mine, fairly literal, but focused on the effect produced.

5. The Spanish word "pito," the dictionary meaning of which is "whistle," is the common colloquialism for "penis." Yet writing "prick" in English makes the poem, for me, more overtly vulgar than it is.

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